

Maohden Vol. 2

Hideyuki Kikuchi

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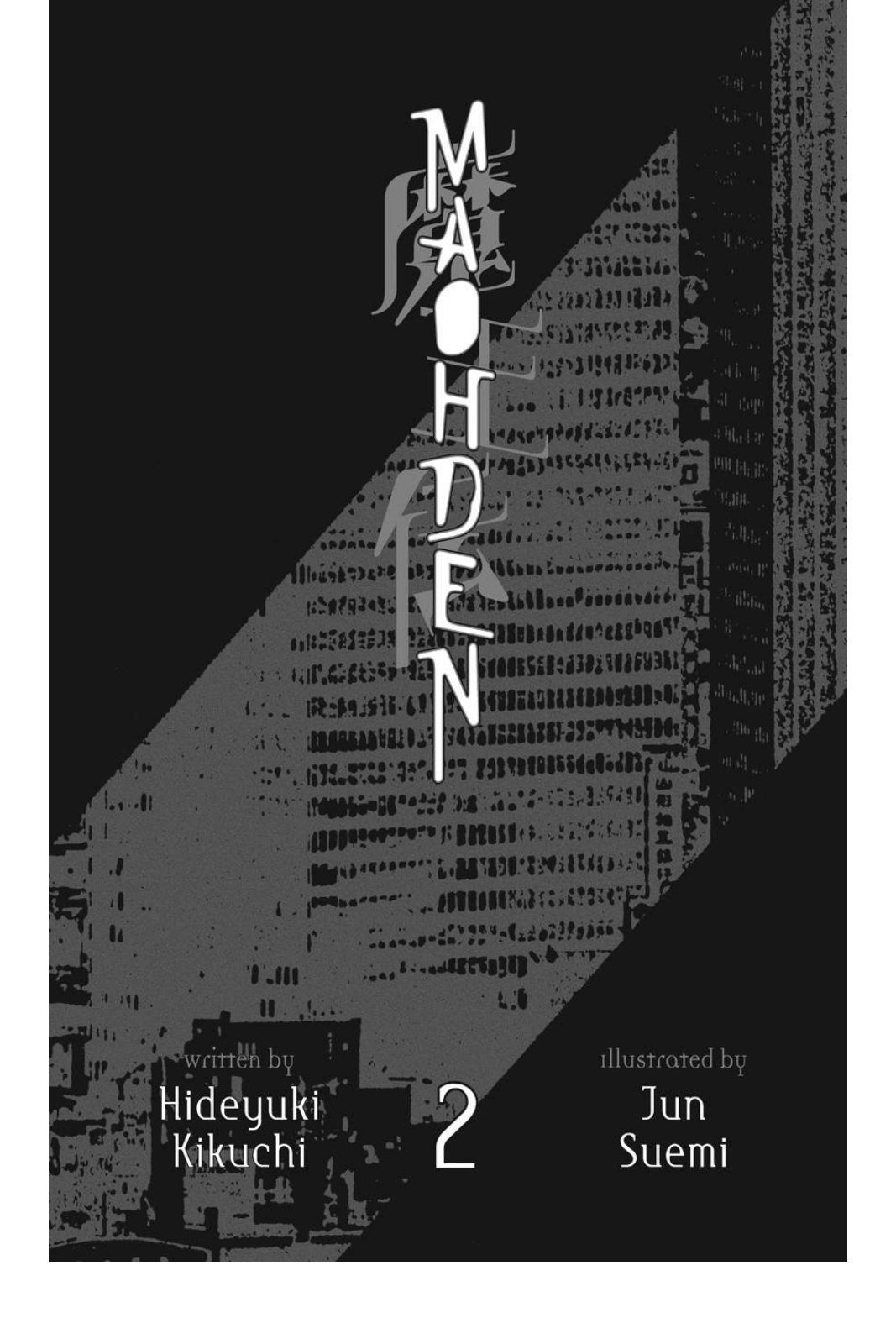


MAHAKIDEN 2

PREQUEL TO
YASHAKIDEN

written by
Hideyuki
Kikuchi

illustrated by
Jun
Suemi



MAOH DEN

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Author's Note

I have instilled in *Maohden* all my affection for the city. Here is the place where the dreams spring literally to life; a battlefield between witches and warlocks; a world where death devours life even as the land sustains human habitation.

I wrote *Maohden* in an effort to create another world within this world.

Fuji Television, the Shinjuku Ward Government Building, Yasukuni Avenue, Takada no Baba—all part of this world yet now caught up in the realms of the fantastic and the grotesque.

In broad daylight and in the dark of the night, I hope to instill deep feelings of *déjà vu* in those of you who also share these twisted visions of the future.

Author's Bio

Says Hideyuki Kikuchi, “I like bringing to life haunted and mysterious people, capabilities, and cities in the midst of the modern world.”

Maohden just may be the incarnation of this desire. True to the expectations of his readers, the book overflows with the author's trademark fantasy, action and eroticism.

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in 1949, in the city of Choshi in Chiba Prefecture. While studying law at Aoyama University, he participated in the campus's “mystery and detective novel” club. After graduation, he published stories in *doujinshi* magazines and translated science fiction while working as a magazine reporter.

Hideyuki Kikuchi's debut as a novelist came in 1982 with the publication of *Demon City Shinjuku*. The publication of *Makaiko* in 1985 elevated him to the ranks of bestselling authors. His extraordinary achievements since are well known to his readers.

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Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by
JUN SUEMI

English Translation by
Eugene Woodbury



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A black and white photograph of a city skyline at night. The image is dominated by a large, dark, angular shape in the foreground, which appears to be a stylized representation of a building or a piece of art. The background shows a city skyline with several tall buildings, some of which are illuminated. The overall mood is dramatic and urban.

M A O H A R E N 2

Main Characters

Setsura Aki

The only son of Renjo Aki, this beautiful genie runs a *senbei* shop in West Shinjuku and a P.I. agency on the side. He wields sub-micron thin strands of “devil wire.”

Gento Roran

The only son of Byori Roran has awakened from his fifteen-year slumber. His quest for the seal leads him to a showdown with Setsura. His main weapon is the same “devil wire.”

Hyota

Gento’s strange, diminutive servant secretes oils from every pore that prevent Setsura’s devil wires from taking hold.

Mephisto

As beautiful as he is feared, the Demon Physician is said to even bring the dead back to life.

Mayumi

The beautiful young woman known as the *seal*. Any man who has sex with her, consensual or not, dies a gruesome death.

Azusa Sasaki

The younger sister of Banri Sasaki, a reporter who came to Shinjuku to gather material about Demon City and was killed by Gento.

Yoshiko Toya

The best information broker in Shinjuku and, weighing in at two hundred plus pounds, the fattest.

The Story So Far

Ever since the Devil Quake, the battles for the soul of Shinjuku have never ceased deep within the shadows of the city. On one side of the conflict, the Aki clan: Renjo Aki and his son Setsura. On the other, the Roran clan: Byori Roran and son Gento. Along with their supernatural servant, Hyota.

Defeated by Renjo, Byori vowed to bring himself back to life in fifteen years after placing his own severed head on the coffin lid like a guardian angel. Hyota buried the accursed coffin containing his son deep within the earth.

Those fifteen years have passed. Setsura Aki now owns a *senbei* shop in West Shinjuku and moonlights as a P.I. One day, a squad of yakuza assassins comes after him, leaving him no choice but to dispatch them with his devil wires. Setsura knows that something is afoot. Gento has awoken from his long hibernation.

After a decade and a half, their conflict picks up where it left off. Equally alarming, Gento's skills with his own devil wires have grown to match Setsura's.

Gento makes Setsura an offer he can't refuse: join forces and seek out the seal. A startling proposition that would shape their destinies and put the true nature of Demon City in a harsh new light.

But Setsura does refuse. At the same time, Mephisto, the Demon Physician, is seeing a new patient. The men who've had sex with her have all died strange deaths. As it turns out, Mayumi is the seal they seek.

No sooner has Setsura figured this out but Mayumi is kidnapped by a biker gang. She is subsequently made the prize in the Coliseum Death Match, where Shinjuku's most skilled killers strut their stuff and rank their abilities.

Setsura heads there at top speed, Gento a step ahead of him. He's already discerned Mayumi's true nature for himself.

Part 1: Fighting Freaks

Chapter 1

A sad-sounding siren squawked out a minor chord. However dinged and rusty the housings, the spotlights shone as brightly as the noonday sun. The three white beams focused on the base of the Coliseum bowl.

Two figures stood in the sixty-foot ring.

This was no ordinary bout. It was accompanied by none of the usual audience participation. No applause. No cheering. No stamping of feet. The usual air of excitement that attended athletic meets was nowhere to be found.

One look at the spectators explained why.

Some wore black suits and ties. Some had on shirts and slacks in bold, primary colors. Others traditional *haori* and *hakama*. But every last one of them had an air about him that was markedly different from the typical sports aficionado.

Those unusually sharp eyes, to start with, and the unusually cold vibe surrounding them. These were the representatives of the yakuza jousting for hegemony of Demon City. Light up a nuclear warhead over their heads and Shinjuku would become a Garden of Eden until the next band of wise guys stepped in to replace their fallen comrades.

The princes of the city had the ringside seats, the size of the criminal organization diminishing the further back they sat. Power was the only ticket that mattered here.

“That’s where I’m going to be next year,” the men in the cheap seats all said to themselves, looking down at their superiors with eager eyes.

The announcer declared in a loud monotone, “Tonight’s lineup!” There were no opening ceremonies. No stir of anticipation ran through the audience. Only the sound of rough fingers turning through the thick program guides.

“Listed first on tonight’s card is One, Yanase and Two, Devil.”

That was all. Nothing about where they hailed from, how old they were, their height and weight. It was all irrelevant. Winning was all that mattered. Two hundred pounds of strapping youth was worth nothing without a victory.

Bathed in the silence, the attention of the arena concentrated on them, the two figures advanced. Ten feet apart, they stopped. There was no telling whether this was the distance agreed to beforehand, or simply where the two of them decided to stop.

They were empty-handed. “One” was drawn with red paint—or blood—on the back of the man naked to the waist. The other man had “Two” stenciled on the back of his black T-shirt.

They had equal statures, about five-eleven, a hundred eighty pounds. “One” charged, his hair flying out behind him.

“Two” didn’t move.

One shook his head as he ran. His hair reached out like spider’s threads.

Two jumped back.

Seemingly drawn along by the wind aroused by his movements, a black breeze chased after him.

Two staggered.

Strands of hair slipped out of the breeze and attached themselves to his legs. He didn’t fall. As he slumped toward the ground, the numerous strands of hair righted him again.

From somewhere on One’s body came the whirling spin of a motor. Now it was Two’s hair standing on end. Purple smoke wafted up, followed by the smell of scorched flesh.

He must have treated his hair to conduct and transmit electricity, and planted a generator on his person delivering tens of thousands of volts.

Two bellowed. Smoldering and burning, he swung his upper body like a bat. One’s hair stretched to the limits, and stretched again. The spectators heard the hair being torn out by the roots.

Now One was the one doing the shouting. White smoke and fluid burst from the torn hair follicles. With the electrical conduits ruptured, the power had no place to go but back into his body. The white smoke turned black.

He fell forward with a howl, like a toppled statue.

At the same time, Two sank to his knees. His massive chest throbbed. More than his literal powers of resistance, this was a man who was just plain tough. An assassin who couldn’t readily draw on a variety of techniques would easily fall to the likes of him.

“Please note that Two, Devil, is declared the winner.”

The announcer’s mechanical voice repeated this twice. In the stands, the spectators scribbled in their programs, like baseball fans keeping box scores.

The motions soon stilled. The announcer’s voice shifted their attention to the two new contestants.

“Next is Three, Zapf, and Four, Koshichi Tamenaga.”

Three was a giant of a man dressed in the long black robes of a Catholic priest. Four was a middle-aged man wearing a long black coat.

The giant held a long lance in his right hand. A sickle-shaped blade was affixed to the five-foot-long staff. A strong man like this giant could take a man’s head off his shoulders with a single swipe.

His opponent was empty handed.

As was to be expected, Three churned the air over his head, then aimed the weapon squarely at the chest of Four. The smoothness and speed of the motion spoke to his expertise.

Without sparing a second glance, as if letting it ride on the gust of wind like a feather, he turned the momentum into a sweeping circle and brought the gleaming blade down on Four's head.

A flash of white motion jumped up from below. With a slick sound like the snapping of a wet towel, the lance stopped dead in its trajectory.

At first, it appeared that Three had halted of his own accord. It soon became apparent that was not the case.

The blade should have sliced Four in two from the crown of his head to his waist. Instead, Four caught it between his palms above his head. This was the *shinken shirahadori* technique for seizing a sword with the bare hands.

But Four's great strength meant that Three could neither advance nor retreat from this position. They were six feet apart, just far enough to render footwork ineffective.

No less equally strange was that, witnessing such a remarkable exhibition of offense and defense, no one in the stands said a word or uttered even a gasp of admiration.

Perhaps before any of them could draw the next breath, their eyes had caught sight of a line of silver light drawn between the two men. A two-foot-long sword—more a knife with a long blade and a longer hilt—buried itself into Three's gut.

Four's hand was gripping the shaft.

But his two hands still held the lance immobile above his head. This hand belonged to a third arm that sprang out from beneath his coat.

The giant's eyes opened wide before filling with the certain knowledge of death. He swayed.

Four released the hands above his head. The freed blade again continued on its downward trajectory, now cutting through the wind, slanting sideways at Four's neck.

Again the air stirred. The dead face froze in surprise.

Four spun around, turning his back before the rushing blade could reach. Two more arms jutted out from the sides of his coat, twisting in a way that would again intercept Three's attack.

Four grinned. Another hand appeared at his collar and flung the coat into the air.

From his neck down to his waist, the torso of this otherwise ordinary-looking, middle-aged man sported dozens of writhing, waving appendages.

Hairy muscular arms, slender limbs like those of a woman, small, cute and chubby ones like a child—the fingers on all their hands opening and closing, seeking and grasping, endowed with split-second reflexes that could meet a flying lance and launch a counterattack.



Not just knives and swords, but in a battle involving guns, lasers, or any kind of deadly projectile, this middle-aged man could equal the effectiveness of ten.

Four turned to face Three. As many arms covered his front as his back. The malicious smile on his face deepened. And then vanished without a trace.

The sword sticking out of Three's back drew a vertical line up his body, severing the long black robes and traveling straight through his head. In a flash, the giant was divided neatly in two.

An unexpected *whooshing* sound reached the stands. A black, filmy curtain leapt from the severed torso, coursed toward Four and engulfed him, turning him into a misty, dark lump.

The black net slowly pulsed and contracted. Screams burst forth from within, stifled to muffled groans, a sound like the beating of grasshopper wings inside a paper bag, and the gnawing and smacking of lips.

A woman's white arm pushed out of the thick, cloudy mass, calling for help like a drowning swimmer sinking beneath the surface. The black curtain surrounded it once again, stripping away the skin and muscles and tendons, until only the white bones remained. And then they too crumbled away.

Literally eaten away.

A swarm of black moths with translucent wings had burst forth from Three's body. These moths had limbs and human-like fingers and claws and fangs that greedily devoured Four's body.

Three had not sustained them for himself. Three was little more than a vessel, a cocoon, his body and soul controlled by the insects to their own ends.

Split in half by the sword, the body lay there lifeless. The humming swarm ignored it, soared into the air, and disappeared into the moonlit sky.

Their appearance here had only been in search of another meal. Left behind in the coliseum was the severed "cocoon" and the coat and shoes of Four. The not uncommon results of a battle of demons in Demon City, that could be witnessed nowhere else.

"Zapf is declared the—" The announcer stopped, and continued a moment later. "A correction. The bout is declared a draw. Both numbers are stricken from the results."

All those scribbling hands in the stands made the proper notations in the programs.

But what precisely were they looking at? What were these expressions on their faces that showed no fear or surprise, or these eyes that witnessed such otherworldly combat as if they were seeing nothing at all?

Chapter 2

The Death Match held at the Coliseum was part of the annual Assassin Games, open to veterans and amateurs alike.

Asked what truly set it apart and the people who put on the show all said the same thing with the same wry grin: “Nobody up there in the stands knows shit.”

Not a nice way of putting it, but awfully close to the mark. What they meant was, “All they know is *who* wins. Not *how*.”

The financial reasons, to start with. Winning combatants were assured of earning a living as a professional killer. They expected to get offers from all the professional criminal organizations. Even if they chose to remain independent, they could double or triple their standard fees.

Pros with established reputations and money in the bank were an exception, seeking out stronger opponents in a quest to test their own physical limits. Their skills were also considered proprietary information.

Upon entering the arena, the spectators were dosed with beta blockers. No matter how intense the competition, they would not get caught up in the thrill of the fight. Because the compounds in the drugs were never disclosed, there was no readily available counteracting agent.

A bright light was trained on each seat. Closing their eyes wouldn’t keep out the concentrated beam. In any case, the drugs in the beta blockers also prevented anyone there from shutting his eyes for too long. Not that they could see what they might have thought they came to see anyway.

The light blinked out a complex series of pulses. The impact on the visual cortex had an auto-suggestive effect that, together with the drugs, served to coerce the desired behavior.

Namely that, “All they know is who wins.”

No matter how they might squint or peel their eyes, any memory or comprehension of *how* the match was fought was expunged. The spectators filling the stands really did not know shit about anything but the final results.

This was all by design. The skills that earned these professional assassins their keep were their “intellectual property,” trade secrets kept

even from their employers. Revealing them to a grandstand full of spectators would be as good as a soldier handing his weapons over to his enemies.

The only thing he would spell out was exactly what would happen to anybody thinking of stabbing him in the back.

A lot of the newbies—both the recruiters and the recruits—prattled on about non-disclosure agreements, but the Coliseum officials preferred to stick with their memory erasing technology.

The employers waxed cautious about buying a pig in a poke. But sneak previews and test drives were out of the question.

However mistaken it might be to state that “Nobody knows shit,” that probably was closer to the actual truth. In the end, the assassins were just another set of pawns being played on the chessboard of this city. Considering the odds of making it through another day, a man in this town might as well make his own luck.

So their attention was drawn instead to the south end of the arena, where the “prize” lay on its makeshift altar, arms and legs bound, writhing in mortification, her body fully exposed for all to see.

The fifteen finalists remaining after thirty bouts would draw straws. But a human being had never before been the bounty that awaited them. Any number of physically alluring women could be procured in this city. The organizers who’d designated this prize had something particularly grave and dangerous in mind.

The eyes of the spectators turned toward the naked girl filled with dark thoughts. What exactly—who—and what—was she?

A polite knock. The doctor flung the tabloid weekly he’d been reading into a corner of the room. “Ah, come in,” he said with forced formality. And then winced. He still hadn’t gotten used to the creaking hinges.

But seeing the handsome young man, he set that annoyance aside. “My, my,” he murmured to himself.

“I am pleased to meet you,” the young man said. “My name is Gento Roran. I was wondering if I could ask a favor of you.”

The doctor wordlessly indicated a folding chair sitting a short ways off.

“No, here is fine.”

Gento leaned back against the wall. He scanned the room with cold eyes befitting the cool beauty of his face. Even without observing the gurneys, operating tables, and the automated therapy beds lining the back wall, this was clearly the infirmary.

Some of the tools and instruments were the latest designs and models, while the medicine cabinets and the desk and digital office assistant were at least a decade old. The low ceilings and floor and walls

were bare concrete. There were no refrigeration units.

All the more telling were the black blotches staining the floor, most likely bloodstains, radiating a palpable aura of constrained malice and accursed loathing. Perhaps that was what kept the air unusually cool.

Gento pointed at a body lying on one of the operating tables. "He dead?"

This was One, the loser of the first match. The doctor shook his head. "Not dead yet."

"As I should have expected," Gento said with a thin smile.

The losers were brought here to be resuscitated, in most cases pretty much brought back from the dead.

"What was it you wished to ask of me?" the doctor said, casting a sidelong glance at the tabloid in the corner.

Gento nodded. "I would like to employ your services for a short while."

"Well. I don't come cheap."

"I didn't expect that you would. But for the time being, you will have to settle for a reward other than money."

"Meaning?"

"You would behold the fate of the world."

"You don't say."

"I wish to reveal unto you the mysteries of the universe."

"That sounds a bit too heavy for my tastes. I think you should be looking for Doctor Frankenstein."

"He did nothing more than raise the dead," Gento sniffed. "Make my wishes come true and you will see the dead spring spontaneously back to life."

"Sorry, but the only thing I can operate with is a scalpel."

"It's enough. I wish you only to examine a single girl."

"Where is this girl?"

"I will retrieve her from all that foolish commotion going on above. For reasons that will soon become apparent, this room will not do. You will accompany me to my abode. Everything you need will be waiting for you there."

"Interesting. But first—"

A stampede of footsteps erupted outside the door. The door banged open. Two corpsmen carried a bloody man in on a stretcher.

"He's all yours." The man wearing a baseball cap touched the brim of his visor.

"Round three, eh? Condition?"

"Some sleeping bug injected into his gut. After that, got busted in the head."

"Understood."

After moving the body on the stretcher to the operating table, the corpsmen bowed and left. Noting that they hadn't cast a single glance at

Gento or apparently even felt his presence, the doctor said in a matter-of-fact voice, “Seems as if they can’t see you.”

He proceeded to the operating table. The patient they’d brought in was in his early forties. He was wearing a gray crew neck T-shirt. The top of his head was caved in. Gray matter oozed from the cracks in his skull. The kind of injury that anywhere else would receive a fatal diagnosis on the spot.

But he was still clinging to life. His torso—the whole upper half of his body—pulsed up and down. Gento’s face reflected in the blade of the sonic scalpel in the doctor’s right hand as he addressed the patient.

“In these games, if you lose you’re dead. But before picking up any of your appearance money, you’ll likely be spending that much on the aftercare.”

With no warning about covering his eyes or the like, the doctor sliced him open from his throat down to his waist. The flesh practically flew apart. The innards popped out, like they’d been dying to get out.

In the white light, a squirming worm-like creature—less a snake than a stringy sludge worm—no eyes or nose, and a red pinprick of a creepily constricted mouth that curved inwards. Twisted and folded and wounded around itself, writhing in the viscous organic fluids, with no evident awareness of the body itself—it was enough to make the most jaded medical student retch.

The man’s innards had been thoroughly laid to waste by this creature.

“The brain’s a goner, but the rest may come in handy,” said the doctor, cauterizing the wormy bug spilling out of the man’s innards and onto the operating table. The kind of remark that might be expected from a “doctor” who was probably the real thing, though he certainly didn’t act like it.

He took a flask from the medicine cabinet, removed the stopper, and tipped it upside down. A few drops of the tea-colored liquid fell into the undulating abdominal cavity. An acrid vapor of the same color arose. Gento furrowed his brows.

The doctor waved his hand in front of his face and nodded as he calmly observed the discolored, twisted, festering bug.

“What is the prognosis?” Gento asked.

“The abdomen is a total loss. The lower extremities are worth saving. The hands and head weren’t eaten by the creature. The deal is, die in there and it’s first come, first served.”

“Wouldn’t that encourage the grave robbers to rush the dying along?”

“That enters into the equation. Five people need to sign off on it first.”

“This is a frightening city,” Gento said with a wry smile.

The doctor swept the scorched remains into a dustbin and picked up a laser cutter.

“Incidentally, I happen to have on hand a man with skills resembling yours.”

“You don’t say,” the doctor said, as the man’s head dropped off with a dull thud.

“His specialty is sewing corpses back together again, a kind of mix and match operation, and breathing a facsimile of life into the results. This being a facsimile means it overflows with many times the strength of a normal human.”

“Remarkable.”

The doctor’s right hand flashed again. The pale arm separated at the shoulder and rolled onto the table. But why was Gento telling all this to a doctor he had never met before?

“I’m sure he would be delighted to arm himself with talents like yours. What do you say?”

He spoke with a smile in his voice. If the doctor had turned around, he would have seen no smile on his face.

A clatter of footsteps outside the door again interrupted the conversation. A pair of corpsmen rushed in bearing another “athlete” on a stretcher. The skin of this one had the rough, hard texture of a rhinoceros. It had obviously done little to dissuade his opponent.

Rivulets of water streamed off his hair onto the stretcher and the operating table.

“Did he drown?” Gento asked.

The corpsmen turned and noticed him for the first time.

“Who’s this guy?”

“And what the hell is he doing here?”

The surprise and outrage were hardly unreasonable. What went on behind the scenes at the Coliseum were tightly held secrets, not to mention that viewing a body and the way the man died could easily reveal the techniques of his opponent.

The employees here were kept under lock and key, and the corpsmen had their memories erased after the competition. Even the competitors weren’t allowed out of the locker rooms. The guards had orders to shoot on sight anybody who left before their allotted time.

Somebody with unlimited access to the infirmary, able to witness the losers who ended up there, could upset the delicate balance maintained in the black markets throughout this city.

Not waiting for an answer, the corpsmen were already reaching for the large-caliber machine pistols on their hips. A pair of *clicks* rang out as their thumbs toggled the safeties—

“Stop it,” the doctor said in an unexcited voice.

A brief moment of hesitation, then the guns cleared the holsters. The next sound was a crisp *ping*, as if the air itself had turned to ice and snapped cleanly in two.

The barrels of the two guns drew a bead on Gento’s midsection.

Aiming for center mass was always the best option. Even at this range, the head was a tricky target. Without a direct hit on the heart, the odds of retaliation were high.

The abdomen didn't usually guarantee a quick death, but was always good for a TKO. Except their fingers couldn't pull the triggers.

A slanting line ran through the blue steel of the machine pistols. When it reached the grip and the flesh between the thumb and forefinger, it turned crimson. A moment later, the line reached the wrist and everything above it, hand included, slid off.

Thumping to the floor at their feet, the fingers eerily continued to twitch, to no effect. The two corpsmen stared dumbly at their missing hands, only screaming when the blood started to spurt.

A similar line wrapped around their necks, and their heads soon followed their hands. As if unaware of what had happened, they gazed up at their still-erect bodies. But the eyes soon dimmed, the lids fell.

"What say you?" said Gento, looking at the headless men standing there.

The doctor didn't answer. Didn't even seem to hear him. His attention at the moment was focused on the headless corpsmen, all three of them rooted in place like a trio of posts.

"Think of them as a present, a retainer fee so to speak, to work in my exclusive employ. I'm sure you are adept at disposing of unidentifiable bodies."

"You are a persistent bugger. I accept. But you've got to be imagining things if you think there is any sort of employer/employee relationship going on here."

"Whatever. Once it gets out that these two are missing, there's bound to be an uproar."

With that, Gento Roran opened the door and silently disappeared from view, leaving behind the doctor and the thick smell of fresh blood.

"Hire me?" The question at last rose to his lips. "I cannot imagine what for. It should be interesting finding out. But he's right. All hell is going to break loose."

Chapter 3

A curtain of trees surrounded the circular Coliseum.

Without disturbing a leaf, a dark form slipped through the branches and set down on the stone paving in front of the Coliseum. The young man in black stood there in the oppressive heat of the night. The countenance rising from the slicker was as pretty as the pale moon above, enough to send a shiver down the spine.

Though when his leather boots set foot on the ground without a sound, it became clear that this was not simply another pretty boy.

Setsura Aki.

Eyes filled with no more emotion than the lens of a camera turned toward the Coliseum. “Hope I’m not late,” he said.

A pair of iron rails at his feet emerged from the darkness and disappeared into the gloom.

With the southern terminus at Shinjuku and the northern end at Takada no Baba, this line was well-known to the old-timers as the JNR Yamate. In better times, it once carried four million commuters during the morning and evening rush hours. The Coliseum sat on the grounds of the former Shin-Okubo Station.

This area, more than most, had fallen victim to the Devil Quake. Peering into the darkness past the glow of the hastily rebuilt street lights, the remains of the wrecked houses and buildings could still be seen in abundance.

The flourishing marketplace in the nearby Okubo Station ruins was comparable to the Hanazono Shrine discount bazaar, though even in the full light of day, the aura of destruction hovered over it like a dark cloud. There was said to be no lack of thugs and wise guys among the residents as well.

Setsura approached the front gate. The shutters were lowered across the broad entranceway. Nobody came out, nobody went in—that was the law of the Death Match.

On the other side of the louvered steel shutters, three security officers approached Setsura holding Benelli automatic shotguns against their hips. Their eyes glowed blue in the dim light. Artificial eyes. The upper halves of their bodies were cybernetic.

“What do you want?” said the one in the middle.

“Police,” Setsura said, speaking as the young owner of a *senbei* shop.

“Yeah, right.”

Fingers tightened on triggers. The muzzles of the guns pointed at Setsura’s chest. The magazine of each weapon contained five ten-gauge shells loaded with number four buckshot. If all three of them let loose, there was no imagining what a rain of 250 pellets in total could do to a human body at point-blank range.

“No kidding,” Setsura drawled. “And I happen to know something you might find interesting. Turns out we’ve got one of our men in there. Think you could find him for me?”

“What?” shouted the man on the right, his face red with anger.

One of the unspoken rules of the Coliseum was no formal involvement by the cops. There were plenty of former officers among the contestants, and a few on active duty as well. But start investigating *that* and a city-wide war was bound to break out with every gang that made its home here.

Which was not to say that the police wouldn’t be happy to round up and eradicate all the killers in one fell swoop. They’d been known to send in undercover cops—who were never heard from again.

Even so, Setsura’s pronouncement was enough to arouse in the organizers all those old fears.

“Who the hell are you?” The middle man said, “Call it in.”

The man took a few steps back to an intercom attached to the wall. The speaker buzzed first. He picked up the handset. “What? An intruder?”

The other two took their eyes off Setsura. “Shit, he wasn’t kidding. You, stay right where you are.”

The older of the two motioned with his hand. Setsura watched amazed as the steel shutters quietly began to lift up.

A voice squawked from the intercom. “Two corpsmen just went missing. It’s on us if we don’t get ’em back.”

“So can I come in?” Setsura asked.

“Yeah, and hurry it up!”

He put down the handset, circled around behind Setsura, and jabbed the gun in his back. The muzzle wavered in empty air.

Setsura should have been there, but at the last second his body seemed to shift of its own accord. The guard stumbled into the space next to him. He glared at Setsura. Perhaps unwilling to believe that this absentminded pretty boy had busted a move like that, he did nothing more.

“Come on,” he said, jerking the muzzle of the gun.

“If you don’t mind, there’s something I’d like to ask you,” Setsura said, raising his hands like he was being held up. “You the only ones guarding the front entrance?”

“That’s right.”

"I see." Setsura nodded. He said in a strangely loud voice, "I'm not here. Go on with your business as usual."

The intercom buzzed. One of the security guards answered it. The man behind Setsura heard him say, "Everything here is fine. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"Hey, hold on a sec—" He started to turn around, but thought better of the inclination and continued toward the stairs, the Benelli pressed against the small of Setsura's back.

The two other guards lowered the shutters. They turned their watchful gaze to the world outside the Coliseum, as if nothing had changed before or after Setsura had arrived. Just like he said, any knowledge of Setsura's existence had been erased from their thoughts.

On the field of combat, the competition continued without a hitch. But the corridors beneath the stands were seething with an altogether different fervor. Two of the corpsmen responsible for carrying the defeated to the infirmary were nowhere to be found, vanished without a trace.

When asked, the doctor only scratched his head in bewilderment. Having no cause to doubt his word, they didn't question him further. Instead, they directed their attention to the supposed intruder responsible and launched a search.

A patrol in the first basement level observed somebody sauntering down the hallway. They aimed their shotguns and ordered him to halt.

"Hey, it's me." Holding up his hands was the clearly-annoyed guard who'd been escorting Setsura.

"What are you up to down here?" said the patrol leader, while scanning the guard's body with his aura detection electronic eye. Disguises using 3D holograms and artificial skin were becoming all the more complex and refined by the day, now impossible to discern with the naked eye.

However, unnatural electronic and chemical alterations still showed up as disturbances in a person's natural aura. As of yet, nobody could escape these detection devices.

"I'm not up to anything," the guard said. "Nothing's going on upstairs. Thought I'd come down and lend a hand."

"We got our hands full already. Damned lucky you didn't get shot. I take it you didn't see anything funny on your way here?"

"Ah, no."

"Then go back upstairs and don't abandon your post."

Urged along by the muzzles of four guns and flame throwers, the guard disappeared up the stairs.

"How does he check out?" asked one of the patrol members.

"Nothing off with his aura. But something still seems off about the

guy. Tail him. If things start getting weird, shoot him in the legs.”

One of the patrol members nodded and hurried off with stealthy steps.

“Move out,” the patrol leader said to the rest.

A blue-red blob appeared in his peripheral vision, the aura of a rat. No matter how well a creature might conceal itself, as long as the space was not perfectly sealed, the flare from its aura would leak out.

Nevertheless, a thorough search yielded nothing out of the ordinary, neither hide nor hair of an intruder or interloper.

Chapter 4

When the heavily-armed security guards barged into the doctor's office, they encountered a scene that would send a chill down the spine of the most stouthearted man.

The doctor was prepping the heaps of arms and legs and internal organs of the dissected corpses with cryo-preservatives. With each injection of the purple fluid, a pearl-white sheen covered the hand or foot as it froze solid.

Having prepared them for transport later, he carefully removed them to another table. Whether by accident or choice, that table faced the door. This strange array of ice sculptures was the first thing the security guards saw. Needless to say, the sight stopped them in their tracks.

"Nice hobby you got here, Doc."

This was the patrol leader who'd just sent the security guard—the one who had "apprehended" Setsura—packing. He scanned the room with electronic eyes that looked like a pair of pyramids cleaved in two.

"Any suspicious characters hanging around these parts?"

He was being polite, though in a manner that clearly suggested any attempt to hide the truth would be swiftly dealt with. Unfortunately for the rest of them, he'd been promoted to his position on the strength of his ambition alone, and now his pride and inexperience came too often to the fore.

"Somebody came by earlier," the doctor said, not turning around.

"Well, I'd like to inspect the place again for myself," the patrol leader said with a presumed air of authority.

"Suit yourself," the doctor said, picking up and examining what looked like intestines. "Looks good to me. Have a bite. Save some for the others."

He tossed it over his shoulder. It wrapped around the neck of the patrol leader like a snake. With a yelp of surprise, he flung it off.

"Waste not, want not," somebody called out, snagging it out of the air. "The doctor's special recipe. Very good."

He chomped down on the end of the viscera-shaped sausage. Apparently he wasn't alone in the opinion.

"Hey, don't hog it all to yourself."

"Me, too."

Hands reached out and tore off chunks and gnawed and chewed.

“What the hell are you doing!” the platoon leader barked. “We got a job to do here!” He yanked the sausage away from the nearest guard.

“Whoa, take it easy, man,” the guard said. “Seems you’re new on the job. A little favor Doc here does for us all the time.”

“He makes this for you?”

The platoon leader glared at him. The guards only shrugged. As was to be expected, the leader had more than enough dignity to make up for his youth.

Whatever was stuffed inside these intestines and however it was prepared, the pieces oozing out and falling to the floor had an aroma that made the mouth water. The platoon leader furrowed his brows.

The doctor said with a wry smile, “If you see anything worth investigating, go right ahead.”

The leader averted his eyes. Taking that as a signal, the rest of the platoon dispersed. They soon announced the results of their search.

“Nothing here out of the ordinary,” each one announced in turn.

The leader’s eyes lit up. With a jerk of his chin he indicated a still-intact body on the gurney, the head covered by a sheet. “Wheel him over.”

“You gotta be kidding—”

The reluctance of the guards had less to do with any question of what was lying under the sheet, and much more to do with openly doubting the doctor. He’d been here, it seemed, practically forever. There was one iron rule, steeped in blood and gore, that everybody followed: *Nobody disses Doc.*



"There've been only four bouts, and there are five bodies here. One was a mutual self-destruct, but nothing dressed like that has fought so far. That makes one too many." He ordered, "Open him up!"

Nobody moved.

"Listen, you sons of bitches—"

The muzzle of his shotgun had begun to swivel toward his subordinates when the doctor intervened. He approached the gurney with a few quick steps and said, "Will this do?"

He drew back the sheet. A murmur of surprise washed around the room. The young man lying there was stunningly handsome. He surely must be Setsura.

"So who's that?" the patrol leader asked, a touch of cockiness in his voice.



"What it looks like. A corpse. Do you detect an aura?"

The doctor didn't waver in the slightest. The leader fell silent. The aura detector showed nothing at all. That face was nothing more than a beautiful mask. He'd known it from the start, and was only trying to get back at the doctor for showing him up before.

"Sure, it's a dead body. But what's it doing here?"

"I brought it with me."

"You what?"

"The poor thing died of an unusual disease," he said, gently patting the pale face. "I meant to examine him more thoroughly at my hospital, but ran out of time. I was afraid if I just let him be, the rampaging bacteria would leave me nothing to work with."

"You talking about an infectious disease?" scowled the leader.

"Let's get going," said one of his men, moving toward the door.

"Hold on a second." A wicked smile rose to his face. "Doc, how about you inject some of that preservative into *this* body?"

The guards blanched a bit, but the doctor was unfazed. "Fine with me."

He nodded and returned briefly to the operating table. He came back with a vial and syringe. After the patrol leader confirmed that he'd filled it with the purple liquid, the doctor jabbed the needle into the carotid artery and pushed the plunger all the way down.

"Satisfied?"

"Yeah," the leader said dully. He'd gone all in on this attempt at

intimidating. Now the doctor held the upper hand.

“Be on your way, then,” the doctor said, as if it were all in a day’s work. The patrol leader bowed and hurried out of the room.

The footsteps disappeared down the hall. The doctor turned back to the still-as-death Setsura.

“Neat trick, that,” he said with heartfelt sincerity. “Makes me want to autopsy you for real.” He got the antidote from the medicine cabinet and injected it into his arm.

Two minutes later, signs of life had returned to the waxy countenance and the black-clad chest began to almost imperceptibly rise and fall.

“And people think *I’m* the one always doing unreasonable things on a whim,” Setsura complained.

There was a touch of hoarseness in his voice, probably the lingering effects of the preservative that would have killed a normal man. All the antidotes in the world shouldn’t have made that big of a difference—unless he had really been dead as a doornail.

Only one word could describe him—*genie*, as known as a *jinn*. With a light shake of his head, Setsura climbed off the gurney.

“What did you come here for?” the doctor said.

“Got a thing or two to do.” Setsura looked around and said, “Interesting place you’ve got here, Doc.”

The doctor nodded. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Setsura turned his attention to two of the white ice sculptures sitting at the back of the operating table. He picked one up and examined the neat line severing it from the rest of the body.

The doctor said, “Quite the piece of work. I don’t think they knew what hit them. Gives you goosebumps, eh?”

Setsura was holding the head of one of the corpsmen. He nodded. “It certainly is a clean cut.” He put the head back on the operating table. “I take it the surgeon who did the *operation* stopped by?”

“Ah, about thirty minutes ago. He offered me that and the other one as gifts and disappeared. I don’t know where, but it appears no one has caught up with him.”

“He’s got a thing or two to do here too,” Setsura said softly.

“You’d better wait a while longer,” the doctor said, lovingly caressing his strange sculptures. “The patrols haven’t finished with their search.”

“No can do. I’m in a hurry.” But for a moment, Setsura couldn’t avert his eyes from the severed body parts. “He is getting better,” he said under his breath. “Just like his father said. That casket is his instructor. It’s well past time to dispose of both, and the sooner the better. Upstairs, eh?”

A stampede of footsteps echoed outside the door. “Oh, shit,” Setsura said. He hopped back on the gurney and lay down.

Part 2: Stealing the Seal

Chapter 1

The city late at night, the ruins of East Gokencho.

Any number of restoration efforts had ground to a standstill. The pleasure quarters around the subway station had returned to their past glories, and perhaps now surpassed them. But the surrounding areas were left to their own devices, and the residents who lingered there poured their efforts only into their own yards and gardens.

Look closer, and here and there beneath the moonlight, the silhouettes of a building or two or three could be seen. Beyond them slumbered rows of houses.

The mortuary on the street bordering West Gokencho was one of them. It'd opened for business just three days before, a two-story building sitting on a sixty square yard plot of land.

Three wreathes hung from stands in front of the shuttered entranceway.

A tall, sensual shadow approached the establishment. An alluring woman with short-cut hair, her eyes hidden behind sunglasses. Practically bursting out of her hot pants and bikini top, she possessed a ripe youth that betrayed the maturity her body otherwise suggested.

Azusa, the little sister of the reporter killed by Gento Roran.

“So this is the place. Nothing else suspicious around these parts. But if Setsura said so, there must be something afoot.”

She'd come here right after Setsura Aki had flown straight from San'eicho to the Shin-Okubo Coliseum. The mention of his name, and corresponding image in her mind's eye of that comely face, made her blush. She quickly composed herself and turned her gaze toward the street. A tweak to the frame of her sunglasses engaged the night vision sensors.

“Still digging in the earth behind that convenience store. Awful strange. Hmm, where to start first?”

After a moment's thought, Azusa made her way to the big pile of rubble behind the mortuary. Despite her blue ankle boots—the high heels suggesting a bias to fashion rather than practicality—she climbed the bricks and stones without a hesitant step, and without the mound collapsing beneath her.

A minute later, she was in the midst of the ruins, the remains of a sizeable building. Here and there were the rusty remains of binding and

packaging equipment. This was what was left of the Tohan Corporation.

Azusa looked back at the mortuary. And then turned a hundred and eighty degrees. There was the convenience store where she'd asked about local love hotels that afternoon.

Azusa had led Setsura to the midwife who'd brought him into this world. But he still hadn't held up his side of the bargain—namely, spending a night with her. So she'd taken the initiative. That was when a middle-aged lady appeared, her apron turned inside out, and mud where it shouldn't have been.

She'd been interrupted in the act of digging something.

Setsura didn't react when she'd explained this, and instead had Azusa drive her street buggy all about the ruins. Before splitting up in San'eicho, he told her to keep an eye on the convenience store and the mortuary, and flew off toward Shin-Okubo.

Azusa didn't ask why. From the first time they'd met, she'd been transfixed by his beauty. He was more handsome than any man she'd known, an Adonis sent down by the gods.

Like the moon glittering in the sky, a moon lily glimmering in the grass. And not only that. Behind that indifferent, naive mien, that might even fall for a child's machinations, lurked a cold-hearted, even gruesome, silhouette.

He cast a shadow that wasn't human. It took hold of Azusa's heart, her womb, her soul, and made her a prisoner of his will. Every time she pictured his face, her hand started slipping south of its own accord and it was her own face that flushed.

He and Gento Roran had somehow become mortal enemies. This enmity not only involved a struggle for the soul of Shinjuku, but reached into the greater mysteries of their own beings. The midwife had told Setsura that the seal was the key to unraveling it, and the seal was a living person.

While she'd been pestering the lady at the convenience store for the location of a hotel, Setsura had been on the phone, no doubt touching bases with people who had a connection to the seal.

A person at the hospital, Azusa had concluded. The midwife had said that when the seal awakened, signs and omens would show the way. Setsura's father, Renjo Aki, had been present at the birth and had told her as much.

If the seal was a human being, it stood to reason that those signs and omens should manifest themselves in a psychological or physiological form. If the seal did not realize what was happening, a hospital would be the logical place for it to end up.

Setsura must have gotten word from a hospital informant that such a thing had indeed happened. A patient with a most unusual ailment.

That's why he had proceeded to Kikuicho with Azusa to a small bar. The place was swarming with cops. A bystander said that the manager

of the place and her lover had been murdered the night before. Their daughter should be around, but she was nowhere to be found.

Rumors were the daughter had done the deed. Other rumors said she'd been kidnapped by a biker gang. After that, Setsura made a call and they'd proceeded to the gang's crib in San'eicho, in the ruins of the old Shinjuku Technical High School.

That call had been to one of his informants.

In the face of Setsura's wire-wielding martial arts, the gang members turned on each other before confessing that the girl had been sold to the organizers of the Death Match at the Shinjuku Coliseum in Shin-Okubo.

Setsura left things in East Gokencho in her hands and soared off to Shin-Okubo. The hems of his black slicker flapping like the wings of a bird, he'd disappeared into the night sky.

Leaving Azusa here, standing on the diagonal of an almost perfectly square lot between the mortuary and the convenience store in the midst of the Tohan ruins.

The way Azusa saw the situation, Setsura hadn't said it out loud, but whatever the deal was with this Gento Roran chap, something was buried here that was damned important to the both of them. The employees of the convenience store had been tasked with digging it up.

Otherwise, no way would he have left her behind to keep an eye on things.

It was time to do a little detective work on her own. The question of what it was piqued her curiosity. She also wanted to stay in Setsura's good graces. And was additionally intrigued by the mystery of what was going on between him and Gento.

Azusa bent over and pressed her ear to the ground. She couldn't hear a thing. Wherever they were digging, it must be deep underground. And the earth had to go somewhere. Probably to the mortuary.

That was a lot of work and a lot of wariness. Why all the secrecy? What were they keeping secret? Azusa quickly tired of theorizing. It was time for a little breaking and entering. She got to her feet.

Something moved behind her.

She whirled around. It vanished without a sound. The night was hot and heavy and deathly quiet.

And again.

Azusa seized a small stone and flung it square at the center of the target. Whatever had been there wasn't. The darkness flowed back undisturbed.

A foe who could manipulate its "presence" possessed a most frightening ability. An intrigued smile rose to her lips. The challenge of a good fight stirred her blood. She reached for the Smith & Wesson Model 29 tucked into the holster fastened around her hips.

She didn't cock it. No sense in showing her cards too early. She estimated the distance between herself and the street buggy. About forty

yards. The question was whether she could make it.

Her arms and legs reacted before her brain answered the question. She sprang away, weaving between the mountains of rubble. That presence appeared on her right. She glanced in that direction. There was nothing in her line of sight.

She looked down.

There he was. A small shadow on the ground. At first, she thought it was a wild dog. He was dressed in rags, long hair fluttering in the wind. Human. His hands dragged on the ground aside his feet as he galloped along like a great ape.

More than fear, Azusa felt an almost sexual thrill. Her loins trembled. A hot surge of excitement welled up from deep within her soul.

Chapter 2

Azusa drew back the hammer. The ominous sound filled the air. She aimed the gun down at the shadow racing along next to her and pulled the trigger.

The recoil shot through her body. So did the pleasure. She pulled the trigger again. And again. Each time, the reaction bringing her closer to the verge. An indescribable biological reaction, springing from the mind of a conscious killer.

The weight on her right hand increased ever so slightly, like a breeze blowing from above. Azusa's eyes opened wider. A figure perched on her elbow. It offered no more resistance than a feather, yet displaced the same space as a human being.

Bent over from the waist up, almost parallel to her arm, the glittering red eyes glared at Azusa a mere four inches away. Any normal person would have frantically shaken it off. Azusa didn't move her right arm at all.

She was timing her next move as she ran.

Without any warning, her left hand flashed into action. Her forefinger and middle finger formed a V and jabbed at his face. She didn't pull her punches. The blow would gouge his eyeballs out.

Riding on her right arm, the shadow bent backwards like a limbo dancer. Azusa *clucked* to herself. She shook her arm. The shadow didn't move.

But something else did. The gun. She caught it with her left hand, the Model 29. Not cocking the hammer, she raised the barrel and aimed it at the shadow and pulled the trigger.

The roar and the flame and that indescribable shock.

Azusa had gotten muscle enhancing treatments in her teens. Even one-handed, the recoil of a .44 Magnum was nothing more to her than a popgun.

Behind the lenses of the enhanced-vision sunglasses, her pupils grew wider. The man swung an arc around her arm and now was hanging upside down by his feet.

The sound of gunfire echoed off into the distance. A cold and murderous light glowed in her eyes. She crouched down, sprang up a good three feet into the air and came straight down, pile-driving his head into the ground.

His body made another half turn. Azusa again jabbed her fingers into his face.

Now the shadow flipped off her arm and over her head. Not waiting for him to descend, with a blood-curdling *kiai*, she threw her right leg straight up, full extension. This time, her explosive kick merged with the black outlines of the silhouette.

But she felt no impact, sensed no resistance to the vector of her foot. It should have buried itself in his belly. But slipped off as if skidding on a sheen of oil.

With no time to deliver a second blow, Azusa leapt to the side. A long moment later, the shadow alit on his original position, as pretty as a descending bird.

"Hoh," the shadow said. "You knocked me off my perch. You are quite the capable young lady."

"Bring it on," Azusa moaned. "And step on it."

She was getting hot and bothered and already plenty wet down there. Her hot pants were getting soaked. It was starting to run down her thighs.

"Quit fucking around," she said again. "I kill you, you kill me, it's all good. That's the way this game is played. After that you can fuck me silly, or whatever gets you off. For now, cut the pussyfooting around. Hit me with your best shot, else I'm gonna tear you a new one."

He did as she requested.

He bolted straight at her. Azusa countered with a high kick, converting it to a roundhouse sweep of her foot at the last moment.

Foot met forehead. And slid off before the impact could connect.

"Shit!"

Azusa squared her stance. Now she was the one who rushed him, her hands striking at his face as he stood there unmoving. Those slender arms could have taken the fight out of a pro wrestler.

His festering face rose up, two of them, overlapping and merging into what passed as the visage of a man.

Her fists rained down, slipping off each time. She was sure she'd crushed the bridge of his nose. Her hand skidded off his cheek. Sure she'd caved his teeth into his mouth. Only brushed his chin. The man's entire body seemed to be covered with oil.

"Let's call it a day, Missy," he said, not a hint of strain or exhaustion in his voice.

"Be my guest," Azusa said with ragged breaths. Her spent body was equally in ecstasy. She could happily go to her grave like this.

The man thrust out his hands in front of him. Azusa reflexively crossed her arms to parry. An icy cold sensation pierced her wrists and shot through her bloodstream.

As she crumpled to the ground, Azusa felt her body again propelling her senses to even greater heights.

Chapter 3

Everybody called him “Baron.” No one knew his real name. He didn’t know it himself. And yet the mention of that moniker alone would make many a man blanch and drop to his knees.

There was one who didn’t. That man had his attention now, the giant in the room. His fame equaled his own. Siegfried was the handle he went by. Siegfried was the German name of the legendary Norse god. Legend had it that, drenched in the blood of a dragon, he became immortal.

No one who saw him doubted the truth of the legend. The steel bench warped beneath his massive weight. He was ten feet tall and weighed over five hundred pounds.

There was no telling what other skills he exercised with that massive frame, but it was equally likely that he was nothing more than a big, clumsy oaf wielding a ridiculous amount of power. And indeed, there wasn’t a scar to be seen on the hands or even the head jutting from the neck of the blue, short-sleeved T-shirt.

Using that truck-like body as his chief asset, settling accounts on the field of combat without suffering a few bullet wounds and a laceration or two was hard to imagine.

The reason was simple: he killed his opponents before they could injure him.

That alone was not enough to unsettle the Baron, or the other three men in the room. They all believed in their heart of hearts that when the time came, they could consign to oblivion any foe who came at them.

The white-haired old man, the midget, the man in the suit—they all possessed powers beyond the imaginations of ordinary folk. The Baron knew this better than most.

But that wasn’t what concerned him about Siegfried.

There was something *off* about him, not like the big men he’d met before. Today was the first time they’d met. They hadn’t spent even three hours cooped up in the same room.

During those three hours, Siegfried had left the room twice. The Baron figured he had to go to the john. The first time about an hour ago. The second time thirty minutes ago. He was gone three minutes the first time, five minutes the second.

The second time Siegfried returned, something was *different* about

him. The Baron couldn't say what and he couldn't understand why.

The one thing he *did* know was that the Siegfried who went to the john and the Siegfried who came back were different people. Though nothing about these two "Siegfrieds" appeared the slightest bit different.

His forehead jutting out from the few strands of hair like a hard-boiled egg. The slits of his eyes. And for such a large man, the thin lips. The ropey sinews and boulder-like muscles covering his immense frame.

And yet—something was different. Everybody there knew it too. Everybody kept mum. Some soul-stealing monster had taken a seat among them and nobody rang the alarm.

The Baron got to his feet and stood in front of Siegfried. "The two of us need to talk."

He spoke in the voice of the dead, a whiff of air from a rotted sepulcher. And the smell as well.

Nobody looked at him either.

Siegfried's narrow eyes peered down at him. Even sitting down, he was taller than the six-foot Baron. Perhaps he was a remnant of those giants spoken of in the Book of Genesis.

"This way."

The Baron left through the locker room door. Siegfried followed after him, like a gust of wind sweeping through the room. A short ways down the corridor was the door to a workout room.

The door was locked.

The Baron slipped his forefinger between the door and the jamb. A similarly long and slender claw was attached to the unusually pale and slender digit. He slid it up the jamb to the lock. The door opened easily. The two went inside.

The room was a dojo—kenpo karate—approximately thirty feet by thirty feet with a hardwood floor. Punching bags and weight machines in the back.

The two stopped and faced each other in the middle of the room, like an adult encountering a child. Or a big man encountering a dwarf. Facing this great wall of muscle and bone, the Baron didn't twitch an eyebrow.

"There's something way fucked up about you," he said.

A slight smile colored Siegfried's otherwise rugged and expressionless face, as ineffably merry as it was ineffably evil.

"You figured it out, eh?" a cheerful, youthful voice said. "There's no pulling the wool over your eyes."

"Of course—" The Baron's eyes flashed red. "Come out, come out, whoever you are."

"Just a sec."

Siegfried rolled up his shirt to his neck and plunged his hands into his abdomen. Even as his hands sank down to his wrists, the Baron evinced not the slightest reaction.



Not even when the front of his body unzipped in a line from his belly button to his Adam's apple—but unaccompanied by the sound of tearing flesh. It had been severed from the start.

The giant ripped open his own belly with his own hands. And from the wound appeared—

A man clad in black, stained with blood and fat, casting off a bad odor and bearing Gento Roran's countenance, his comeliness not dimmed in the least. Far from it. An orchid in all its sublime brilliance had just emerged from a fetid swamp.

If it was true that the gods made man, then this young man, secreting himself inside the giant and controlling his every move, should be a god.

"So, how did you see through the facade?" he asked, raking back the bangs clinging to his forehead.

"Well, if I had to pin it on any one thing, the bench bent a bit more than before. You weigh more than his guts."

"I'm impressed. But such insights may cost you your life."

Gento flashed an eerie smile. It possessed the kind of demonic air that would have made any other man as tense as a tightly coiled spring. But the Baron only grew more intrigued.

"When did you take him out?" he asked, as if asking about a curious turn in the weather.

"In the bathroom. It was simpler than I imagined. Left the viscera in the garbage with a generous seasoning of disinfectant. It should take another two or three days to get ripe enough to notice."

"Those are some impressive skills you have," the Baron said, fixing his gaze on Gento.

Gento swayed back. "Nice trick you got there, too. You some sort of vampire?"

"There are those who call me that. I have been wanting to quench my thirst ever since I saw that laceration on your cheek. Come into my arms —"

The Baron's cat-like eyes doubled as hypnotic weapons. They shone now all the brighter. When Gento's entranced pupils glowed with the same crimson light, the Baron glided up to him. His clawed right hand rose to the level of Gento's neck and slashed sideways.

A red line rose up on the skin and grew wider. The Baron fastened his red lips to Gento's throat.

Gento sank down, a movement so quick and abrupt that the Baron didn't have time to retreat. His startled face recorded the sharp blow to his abdomen. His unbelieving eyes focused on the object sticking straight through the center of his stomach.

"I hear vampires don't do so well with wooden stakes," Gento said with a complacent smile. "Considering how this might turn out, I happened to have the ideal item on hand. I'll say a prayer for what's left of your soul afterwards."

Gento yanked out the stake. The Baron crumpled without a sound and fell to the floor. The one-foot stake—Siegfried's index finger—was dyed red halfway down the shaft.

He dragged the thin corpse over next to Siegfried and clapped his hands together. "Well, that takes care of that. Except that suspicions are bound to be aroused if he goes missing too."

Gento tapped his temples, jarring loose a fresh thought. "It is strange. The man I was before would have been imprisoned by those eyes of his. The schooling of my family is bearing fruit." A fierce new light blossomed in his own eyes. "Could I pull it off? What only the Aki clan was rumored to be capable of?"

Posing these questions aloud, he raised his hands.

Minutes later, the door to the locker room again opened. The thin man and the giant returned. The old man and the small man were gone. The suit didn't spare them a second glance.

Chapter 4

Azusa woke up to a slap on the cheek. The face of the man delivering it was only a foot in front of hers. A filthy, beastly face, partly covered by the long hair falling across his temples and chin. The same man she'd encountered in the ruins.

In the dim white light, she could see other people behind him. A middle-aged man and woman. A teenager.

Azusa recognized the woman from the convenience store. The man must be her husband. The kid must be theirs. She scanned her surroundings. They were in a tunnel ten feet high and ten feet wide.

The pale green concrete retaining walls and the dull luster of the steel pilings caught her eye. She had expected to find a tunnel somewhere around here so she wasn't that surprised.

"Since you aren't asking, you must have some idea of what we are doing here," the man said in a raspy voice. Hyota. "Which means you are here at Aki-sama's bidding."

"Yeah? Well, if you know what he's bidding, let me know," Azusa answered evasively. "What's with them?" she asked, indicating the family of three.

"One of Demon City's infamous evil broods. I'm sure you have heard of them. Total strangers that call themselves a family while sharing no blood in common."

"One of them—" Azusa started despite herself.

Evil broods were a phenomenon rarely found outside Demon City, total strangers who came together to form a "family" unit and then prowled the precincts of Shinjuku in the guise of true blood relatives while committing every kind of heinous crime.

They took over a location for at least two or three months, sometimes up to two or three years, as they carried out their crimes. Becoming part of the neighborhood and everyday life, nobody suspected them in the least.

When the authorities started getting suspicious and poking around, they would decry the dangers obviously lurking about, and move to a new "safe" place, where they would again take up residence as a "normal" family for several years.

In some cases, the old man playing the grandpa would drop dead of old age. There were records of formal funerals being held.

A group would dissolve fairly quickly after completing a job, with the various members splitting off and organizing new “families” of their own.

The truly scary thing about these “evil broods” was how the players became their roles in both body and soul. That they should alter their characters and personalities to fit the new family profile was hardly surprising. But there were documented cases of skeletal structure, physiognomy, and even fingerprints changing.

A man became the boy in the literal sense of the word. It could be attributed to a kind of psychological need to fit in, along with mutual self-hypnosis arising out of a perverted shared consciousness. But in Demon City, the immediate conclusion was that something supernatural was going on.

At any rate, by means fair and foul, it seemed that Hyota had hired them for the ostensible purposes of digging holes and running a convenience store.

“If you and Aki-sama have nothing to do with each other,” Hyota said coldly, “then I suppose you would have no objections to being disposed of as an irrelevant bystander.”

As he spoke, his flashing eyes were drawn to Azusa’s hips and thighs. While carrying and tossing her down here, her top got pulled down, exposing her left breast. Abrasions covered the insides of her thighs. A raw and seductive combination that would fill any man, not just the likes of Hyota, with hair-raising desires.

“Ha! So you want some of this then?” Azusa said with a sly grin, aware of the power of her body. She sent a tremor through her hips. “I said you could have your way with me if you won. Or you just like talking dirty? Either way I’m good to go.”

“Either is fine with me too. But *they* are a no less frustrated lot. Alas, having patterned themselves after an upright and industrious family, incest is right out. This should fit the bill perfectly. One bird and three stones. Perhaps a foursome would quench the thirst.”

Azusa sighed. “And if that doesn’t exactly float my boat?”

“I’m sure you could be persuaded to change your mind.”

“Knock yourself out, then.” Because staying alive was her only priority now. Her neck was numb, she couldn’t move her arms and legs, and so had no way to resist. Hyota must have drugged her. She couldn’t best him in a physical fight anyway.

The three family members surrounded her. The father yanked off her hot pants and panties. She wore them both tight and it took a bit of a struggle. But he exposed her nether regions soon enough.

Three pairs of eyes focused on her dark bush and pink flesh.



“That’s an upright and industrious family for you,” Azusa sneered. “I guess they make exceptions when it comes to little things like rape.”

“Seems their moral strictures are less confining when the object of

their lust is not one of them," Hyota observed with a thin smile.

The family shed their pajama bottoms. The father and the son were already stiff as rods and poking skywards. The mother's flushed skin and moist eyes betrayed her own desires.

The father parted her thighs. The kid straddled her face and thrust down at her. Azusa turned her face away. He pursued his target, brushed her lips and penetrated her mouth. When she tried to spit him out the smooth friction from the effort made him groan aloud.

Qualifying to become a member of this evil brood probably meant a murder or two to start with. They couldn't be expected to be any more chivalrous when it came to the sex of their victims.

The father started to lick Azusa's pussy, pretty and pink. Aroused all the more, he slathered the whole length of his tongue against her. As the white beads of saliva coated the ripe flesh, Azusa couldn't help but react. Her hips shifted of their own accord.

He seized her thighs and went down on her all the harder. The kid pursued his game of hide and seek with equal vigor. He laughed, less the laugh of a teenager than a virile, energetic man.

His father buried his jowls between her legs and thrust his tongue inside her. Azusa was getting wet. A rich aroma wafted up. She moaned, unable to contain herself any longer.

The father was losing himself in the effort, noisily lapping her up and down, sinking his teeth into her bush, seeking out her clit.

"Shit—fuck—damn—" The kid's cock found her demurring mouth. Azusa's tongue glided along the shaft, sucking hard as he pumped up and down. The kid stared down, his eyes glittering.

Azusa's body glowed with an eerie, excited hue. Just another friendly father and son outing. The kid looked in his mid-teens. She serviced his precocious pecker as he plunged into her deeper and deeper, until she held all of him in her mouth and laved him with her tongue.

Drool dribbled from the corners of her mouth. The father attended assiduously to the insides of her thighs, gnawing vigorously, leaving hickeys behind like cattle brands.

The kid threw back his head like a bronco rider. "Whoa, Daddy! The bitch is fucking amazing!"

Azusa couldn't help smiling as her tongue worked him to climax. The warm bodily fluids splashed against the back of her throat. The kid pulled back and unleashed a second volley onto Azusa's face.

"Nice shot," said his father, as if his son had just hit a home run in Little League. He got to his feet, putting his member on full display. "Nice piece of work, this is."

"That it is," Azusa agreed. Her face glistened with the kid's cum.

The father charged in. She surrendered at once to the torrid intrusion, deliriously wrapping her legs around his waist. At the same time soft flesh covered her face like a down pillow.

“It’s my turn too,” said the cougar of a mother, licking her chops in anticipation.

Chapter 5

The Coliseum Death Matches had reached the climax. After the midget and the old geezer faced off against each other—the former shooting a stream of spit that could melt rock, the latter with hundreds of doppelgangers at his control—the announcer said breathlessly, “Sixteen, Siegfried and Seventeen, Kunishige Yamada!”

Beneath the useless gaze of three thousand unseeing spectators, the giant of a man confronted an ordinary salaryman in a suit.

“Well, shall we get down to business?” Yamada said, adjusting his necktie. “What are you going to do with that stuffed doll? Hardly a vehicle for demonstrating your true talents.”

“Much appreciated,” Siegfried said in Gento’s voice. “This is not a martial art in which I have much confidence.”

“All the more impressive. But what a shame to die in a place like this.”

“I don’t count on it. You have something I want.”

“What would that be?”

“You. More precisely, you from the neck up.”

“You want to stare at my face all day? Or perch it atop Siegfried’s shoulders. To what end?”

“To the end of being reborn to a new life. In order to accomplish my own goals.”

The expression on Yamada’s face shifted. “Before any of that happens, you should look to your own welfare.”

With those words, his right leg swept up and out. The power of the impact sent Siegfried and his five hundred pounds flying into the air. He landed with a heavy thud twenty feet away and tumbled to the ground.

Gento hadn’t expected the surprise attack, or the sheer strength behind it. He stood back up, shaking his head, and struck a fighting pose. But a roundhouse kick came from above and behind to the back of his head, laying him flat again, kissing the earth.

Clambering up in a daze, an elbow dug into the nape of his neck, Siegfried groaned in Gento’s voice.

This ordinary-looking businessman possessed extraordinary karate skills whose destructive powers would require any other martial artist to don a military exoskeleton to match. Yamada’s right foot dug like a spear point into Siegfried’s side, eliciting a tortured moan.

“What’s the matter, boy? Don’t you at least want to grab a breath of fresh air and die on your feet?”

“The feeling’s mutual.”

He staggered to his feet. The next kick came straight at his ruptured flanks. The leg sank into the giant’s body down to his knee.

Such was his subsequent surprise that Yamada momentarily forgot to extract his foot. He leapt backwards. The young man the kick had intended to kill wasn’t there. That foot met empty space and tore through the giant’s back.

Siegfried himself was nothing more than a shell, a marionette dancing at the end of strings pulled elsewhere. With a start of panic, Yamada craned his neck skyward.

“A necrodancer, who makes a dead man walk. Are you Setsura Aki?”

“Sorry, but no.” The dark voice drifted like a black tendril of smoke from the gate out of which Siegfried had emerged. “My name is Gento Roran. And to be honest, until yesterday, I was not capable of such feats either.”

A shadow moved beneath the small light illuminating the gate, the young man who’d entered the locker room earlier. Yamada was about to rush him when he felt a sharp stinging around his neck.

The shrill cry that followed was not one of pain, but Kunishige Yamada’s *kiai*.

It hardly seemed possible, for the lasso Gento had thrown was the same as Setsura’s titanium devil wires. But Yamada’s hands and feet flashed like steel and severed them like cotton string.

“I take it you haven’t seen my Dimensional Blade?” Yamada declared. He brimmed with confidence as he prowled forward like a cat stalking an unwary mouse.

Parting the air with enough speed to leave a vacuum in its wake created a scythe of wind that could lacerate exposed flesh. Yamada’s hands moved like the cracking of a whip, many times faster than the speed of sound. Faster than the human body should be capable of.

The vacuum in the air spawned a dimensional dislocation that swallowed up anything entering into its space—even devil wires—and rent apart when the void slammed shut.

This was the cutting edge of the Dimensional Blade. Aside from Setsura Aki, the man who wielded it might well be the most fearsome enemy Gento Roran had ever encountered.

“A friendly warning,” Yamada said, fixing Gento in his sights. “Unlike any weapon made of metal, the Dimensional Blade is not confined by length. That hollow shell and the real you, that pretty prize as well—I shall deal justice like Solomon and cleave them all in two.”

Mayumi’s naked body rested unmoving on the platform.

Yamada shifted his stance, severed the charging Siegfried in two, top to bottom, and then similarly bisected Gento behind him. Victory was

his—

But it was his own head sailing into the air. Looking down he saw his own blood gouting onto his torso. And the young man—standing next to the second corpse—smiling up at him.

As his consciousness dimmed into oblivion, Yamada realized that the second victim was the Baron.

Gento Roran had made more than one dead man dance, a truly fearsome talent. Sharing the shadows with the Baron's body, and then convincing Yamada that Gento was behind the charging Siegfried, he'd made the critical substitution at the last second.

With all his senses focused on the battle before him, Yamada hadn't anticipated a third ambush waiting in the wings. Penetrating the void in the careless moment he believed he'd triumphed, Gento instead dispatched him to the great beyond.

The smell of blood wafting on the breeze, the stands still as a cemetery, this battle belonged more in nightmares.

"I have indeed beheld your Dimensional Blade, but you will be a lot more useful after this." Gento stretched out his right hand. Yamada's head fell with a thump onto his palm. "And now, my seal."

As he strode toward the platform, an equally confident inquiry stopped him in his tracks.

"Perhaps I could trouble you for a rematch, for as long as *I* am not *me*?"

Setsura Aki's words rang out like black pearls, made all the more beautiful by the darkness.

Part 3: Angel in Chains

Chapter 1

Gento didn't turn around. The battle was already on. Setsura could have taken his head had he not given him a fighting chance.

"A chivalrous man," Gento said, though with neither sarcasm nor surprise. The simple truth. He might have even harbored an honestly grateful thought in that moment.

"You can keep that head you have," Setsura said softly.

Had they been two men standing around talking in the darkness, such a statement could only be taken at face value. However, the one stood in the gloom outside the ring of light, while the other bore in his right hand a dripping, severed head.

Nobody around them budged. To the spectators and the people running the show, it was as if the stage had suddenly shifted to a separate precinct of Hell.

"Well, that's a dilemma," said Gento. "I don't want to lose either. Another twenty paces and the seal is mine. Waste not, want not."

"I couldn't agree more," Setsura said, in what could only be an invitation to the Death Match of the evening.

"What clued you in?" Gento asked. His right hand bobbed up and down, as if judging the weight of the head. Setsura's poker face told him that he had discerned the identity of the seal, too.

"A certain set of circumstances informed me that the seal was a human being. When its nature began to emerge, abnormalities were sure to manifest themselves in the physical body. The next logical step would be the hospital."

"Search Shinjuku for a patient showing strange symptoms. You are a man with a gift for finding the unique perspective. Hyota had that right about you."

"And how is he doing?" Only Gento could have detected the touch of nostalgia in Setsura's icy voice.

"He still thinks the world of you, as if he would still rather serve you than me. I can't deny feeling a tad resentful, but I suppose such emotions are inevitable. He always loved you more."

"Perhaps because you were never lovable."

"Bingo," Gento said with a sour smile. Perhaps a hint of sentimentality colored the eyes of this genie, too. "You know me, always the bookworm while you were off playing with Hyota. I let your father

know it wasn't right, you cavorting about with the help."

"That is water long under the bridge by now," Setsura said. His words revealed not a hint of emotion, the darkness surrounding him radiated not the slightest sense of bewilderment or alarm. "You want the girl. You don't want to part with the head. And you'll still have to go through *me*."

"So be it," Gento replied.

He'd fought Setsura once before and lost, and yet answered in equally fearless tones. Both had titanium steel devil wires at their command. But Gento couldn't see Setsura, and his right hand was already full with the head. He was coming to bat with two strikes against him.

What moves did this genie have left up his sleeve? For he was not the only genie there.

The air hummed.

A fraction of a second earlier, Gento felt a faint surge aimed at his head, the breeze kicked up by the devil wire, the breath of air aroused by the sub-micron thin filament.

The heavy, dull thud of the impact could only mean that Setsura's intended target was not on the receiving end of the attack.

Siegfried stood a yard in front of Gento, towering over him like a stone wall. The top half of Siegfried's torso—right at the height of Gento's head—slid cleanly off the bottom half.

Even stranger, as the two halves of his body slanted away from each other, Siegfried reached down with his two massive arms and arrested the slippage. It was like he'd divided himself into two distinct living things.

That wasn't the end of it. With hulking yet surprisingly agile movements, Siegfried leapfrogged out of the arena. Throwing his five hundred pounds through the air, he disappeared into the stands.

To the two left behind, making the dead live was not such an impressive feat. At the moment Siegfried intercepted Setsura's devil wire attack, Gento bolted toward the platform where Mayumi lay bound.

The strands of devil wire whispering after him, Gento flung out his right hand. Yamada's head sailed through the air. He did not throw it with enough force, it seemed, to keep it aloft. And yet it flew backwards in a straight line.



Weaving and dodging out of the way of invisible obstacles, the head disappeared into the darkness next to the gate from which Yamada had entered the arena.

“Hoh,” came a low exclamation of admiration.

The darkness swelled and broke apart. His black slicker still dissolved into the blackness behind him, Setsura’s comely countenance glowed vividly in the dark, hovering there like a specter.

Yamada’s head floated in the air on his left. His wide-open mouth, his bared white teeth fastened around Setsura’s right wrist.

Gento reached the platform. He could tell from the cessation of the whispering air behind him that Yamada’s head had hit its target and his teeth had left a painful mark. Its motor functions had long ago ceased, but a strand of devil wire imparted to the skull those same necrodancing skills that made the dead spring back to life.

Skills that had once been the province of Setsura alone.

Gazing down at the naked Mayumi, the owner of that fearsome visage said gently, “We meet at last. Fate has blessed me with my holy seal.”

A spark of volition lit up Mayumi’s vacant eyes, like the glowing wick of a candle about to be blown out. “Who are you?”

“My name is Gento Roran. I am the man you were predestined to meet.”

“What do you intend to do with me?”

“The question I’d intended to ask you. Do you not feel anything of meaning at this moment?”

Mayumi answered him with a puzzled look.

“In any case, let us be on our way. Oh, but before we go, there are a few loose ends that need tying up.”

Gento looked up as Setsura approached. Cloaked in his black slicker, his legs appeared to glide along the ground, Yamada’s head still attached to his wrist. Setsura came to a halt twenty feet away. Even a genie with a blade of limitless length at his disposal must still have a distance he preferred.

“Up until yesterday, I couldn’t have pulled off that necrodancing technique.” Gento spoke calmly, not so much making a threat as an observation. “I believe we are achieving parity on the field of battle. What do you think?”

“You may have a point,” Setsura said.

A puff of black smoke suddenly roiled up from his body. Gento stiffened slightly, preparing to counter with a new angle of attack. A moment later, its true nature became apparent.

Like a shard of the darkness weaving through the night, Setsura’s slicker drifted down with a rustle of wind and covered Mayumi’s body from head to toe, concealing her from so many prying eyes.

“You almost had me there,” Gento grumbled to himself.

He looked anew at his foe. Setsura had made the night his ally. The jet-black, long-sleeved T-shirt cloaked him from the neck down to the wrists. No surprise that the darkness should be so friendly to his equally

black magic.

Extending his fingers, Gento swept his right hand sideways, parallel with the ground. Setsura's arm did the same. They were not mimicking the other's movements. This was the result of them both choosing the same lethal tactic at the same time.

Gento's forefinger pointed down.

Setsura heard a soft *ping*. All anybody else saw was the darkness. Twisting and turning and swerving a dozen times, Gento's devil wire struck at Setsura's forehead.

Setsura silently shifted to the right.

The devil wire aimed at Setsura's forehead changed course again and shot at its target. Setsura leapt away. The stinging wire hummed at the soles of his feet, then faded away like a swarm of retreating bees.

The failed strand looped backwards and this time came at his midsection.

Setsura extended his right hand toward the ground and flicked his pinky. The descending thread coiled like a snake across the ground, divided into two in front of the platform and raced at Gento from the left and right.

Gento jumped backwards, small sparks of light around his ankles. In a flash they became a sparkling swarm climbing Gento's frame, the two strands twining around him in a double helix from his feet to his head. Pretty dewdrops of light sparked as the devil wires crossed.

"Your necrodancing offers you no escape now," Setsura said softly and without humor.

With the slightest tug of his fingers, the devil wires would dig into Gento's flesh and bone, slicing him apart like a Cuisinart.

"Goodbye, Gento Roran."

The pressure Setsura applied to his fingers produced no movement, but only a sharp stab of pain. Yamada's head smiled at him. Still affixed to Setsura's arm, the teeth sunk deeper into his tendons.

In that instant, the killing strands that should have settled Gento's fate instead slipped away. A black mass bolted toward the gates from which he'd come.

Setsura's right hand moved in a beckoning gesture. Their devil wires clashed halfway between the two men with a shower of blue and white sparks and a sound like crystal glass shattering against tempered steel.

Before either could launch a second volley, Gento disappeared through the steel gates, followed a second later by the hurtling ball of Yamada's head.

Setsura felt a wet warmth on his arm. Red blood did run through the veins of this young man after all.

With a wave of his left hand, the fetters holding down Mayumi dissolved. Sprinting closer, he caught her—still wrapped in his slicker—with his left arm.

“Can you walk?”

Mayumi didn't ask him who he was. He probably looked like Gento to her. She shook her head. “They made me drink something—”

Setsura glanced back over his shoulder. People were entering the arena through doors separate from the main gates. They weren't spectators, but the organizers, no doubt objecting to him making off with their prize. In the light of the bright spotlights, the caseless submachine guns glimmered in the hands of the security detail.

“Freeze, buddy.”

“Or we'll shoot.”

They spoke like cops out of an old crime drama. The guns barked fire. The ground around Setsura's legs kicked up clouds of dust.

At the same time, a stir shot through the crowd. Clamoring voices and pointing fingers.

Setsura looked up and said to no one in particular, “Shall I give it a shot?”

The air whispered. The spectators camped around the spotlights heard a much louder reverberation. The unsteady sway soon prompted cries of alarm. The three spotlights toppled forward, the electrical wires sparking and arcing.

The Coliseum plunged into darkness, followed by the sounds of steel and glass smashing together and the shouts and cries of the security detail crushed beneath them.

Several minutes later, when the emergency searchlights came on and guards wearing night vision goggles burst into the arena, the young man wrapped in darkness and the girl had disappeared into thin air.

Chapter 2

Beneath the concrete sky, the air was filled with night. The darkness wrapped around the pillars and the mountains of debris propping up the building cast an oppressive, leaden pall across this world.

Footsteps emerged from one corner of the seemingly infinite black. Heavy footsteps, evidence of substantial weight and volume. Even the concrete floor swayed beneath their tread.

Two shadows emerged from the gloom, Gento Roran and Siegfried's enormous frame. But what an awful state the giant was in.

Down the front of his body, from his throat down to his waist, the flesh was split apart as if he'd been vivisected by a surgeon's scalpel. Not a single drop of blood oozed from the wounds. He surely must be dead, as his internal organs were missing as well.

Propelling him forward could only be Gento's necrodancing techniques. The problem was his head. It wasn't his. Sitting on his shoulders, eyes staring forward like a dead fish, wasn't Siegfried's head, but Yamada's.

They stopped in front of the great mound of dirt, that by now reached out farther than the eye could see. A shadow suddenly descended from the ceiling and landed on the ground between the mound and Gento.

"Hyota."

"It is I."

"I am tired. I will rest for a while."

"You are in need of a cleaning."

Gento touched his pale cheek. "Now that you mention it, I haven't washed myself off since hiding inside this fellow and guiding him hither and yon."

His face was stained with Siegfried's blood and gore. The odor about him was something else as well.

"I shall prepare your bath."

"First, what is the state of my abode?"

"We have at last grasped its location. We shall produce it in a day or two. But in the process, Gento-sama, I happened upon a most curious prize myself."

"Oh? Do you have it here?"

"Yes," Hyota said with a bow. His lower half was so short, and his

upper half slumped so far forward, that when he bowed his head nearly struck the ground.

Gento gave the giant behind him a long look. "My necrodancing should keep him together for the next day or two. The rest depends on that doctor."

"Then we should soon seek out this doctor?"

"No, let's hear about this prize of yours first."

Hyota nodded. He turned to the darkness behind him and beckoned with a jerk of his chin.

A pale figure appeared on unsteady feet. She had short-cut hair and a strong air of physicality about her. A breast spilled from her ruffled blouse. The purple hickeys dotting not only the breast, the nape of her neck, and the bewitching thighs jutting from her hot pants told the story of her forcibly debauched state.

This was Azusa Sasaki.

"Oh, another girl." Gento indicated the giant holding the head. "Store it where it won't rot. And continue seeing to my abode. I do not doubt that others will come looking for it. There will be no end to those wishing to arouse my ire."

"As you wish."

"This girl has something to do with Setsura?"

"Yes. Her name is Sasaki, the younger sister of that reporter. Apparently, Setsura Aki-sama was having her watch this area."

"Sasaki?" Gento narrowed his eyes and shook his head. "Can't quite place it, but the name sounds familiar. Fine, let's have a little chat."

"As you wish," said Hyota, already slipping back into the shadows. Gento alone sensed his presence vanishing from among them.

"Quick little guy," Gento said with a small smile. He waved his left hand at the giant behind him. "Be on your way. Hyota has prepared a place for you to stay."

He must have already trained his human doll to bow. The giant stiffly leaned his top half forward as if he was carved out of clay, slowly straightened, and left in the same direction where Hyota had disappeared into the gloom. The concrete floor notwithstanding, the giant's heaving footsteps reverberated like a bass drum and soon faded away.

Gento cast a cool glance at the woman, her large breasts bared. "This way," he said, gesturing toward the mountain of dirt.

He didn't resort to his devil wires. Azusa was acting of her own accord. But like being reeled along by an invisible line of demonic will, she followed him and climbed the mound.

"Lie down."

Azusa called to mind those strange and overpowering sensations. Made the plaything of that weird "family" beneath the convenience store in East Goken. Penetrated, fellated, bathed in their bodily fluids,

her face and breasts stroked and painted like brushes by their cocks.

She'd burned with humiliation at first, and then abandoned herself to the dogged assaults, Hyota and the father in particular. They went at her long and hard. The middle-aged man had the hands and moves of an accomplished womanizer, making her loins burn.

"Fuck me already!" she'd demanded of them.

Hyota made sure she was, as new and satisfying as her first time ever was. Big and hard. His "rod" impressed on her all the more as he raked the inside of her pussy. She seriously thought he was going to wear her out. The unbelievable stimulation wrenched from her bawdy cries.

Father and son stood by and watched with looks of condescending lust. She didn't care. Her mind was elsewhere. Pleasure ruled over all. If that man told her to kill Setsura, she could imagine doing so willingly.

When Hyota was done, the "father" and "son" stood in front of her to be serviced. Azusa took them in her mouth in turns. The kid told her to do him with her breasts. She could do nothing other than comply.

She lay down and he climbed on top of her. She lifted up her breasts and held his cock between them. "*Nympho bitch slut!*" the kid practically wailed.

"That's me," Azusa rejoined.

The kid practically screamed a war cry as he came, gushing between her breasts and spilling across her neck and lips, where she still held his father's erection in her mouth.

The kid slathered his cum across her chest and breasts. The spectacle moved the father to groan and shoot his warm, wet wad against the back of her throat.

After that, Hyota took her down the moonlit road to this underground grotto. She hadn't walked here. Hyota carried her on his back. She could have pounded on him mercilessly from that position, but the inclination never came upon her.

His strange skills and the aura about him quenched any thoughts of humiliation and revenge. The fierceness of the assault and the pleasures that followed left her in a state of acquiescence.

He piggybacked her along at terrific speed. The wind whistled in her ears. The red eyes peering out from the ruins quickly vanished behind them. This must have been the same creature that bore the midwife to the estate of Setsura's father.

And now she was on a mountain of dirt in a large manmade cave, face to face with the young man who must be running whatever this operation was. Setsura's enemy. The guy in charge of the men who'd assaulted her.

Even knowing all that, she couldn't bring herself to begrudge him. A bizarre state of mind for a tough, no-nonsense broad packing a .44 Magnum.

Within the curtains of gray gloom surrounding them, the faint light

illuminated the dirt mound and the man beside it.

“Lie down,” he said again.

He spoke in a rather gentle voice, not irritated or commanding. Azusa looked at him and did as he said.

The top of the mound was cramped and narrow. Her head and back barely covered the peak. Her legs rested against the downward slope. The pleasant chill of the soft, raw dirt seeped into her exposed shoulder. It must come from deep within the earth.

It wasn’t damp or moldy. Though the underground room was dry, this came as a surprise to her. Azusa let out a long, slow sigh.

“Beginning today, we have let in the light of the moon. Do you understand?”

The faint light brushing aside the darkness was moonlight then. Peeling her eyes, she had seen nothing on the way here. The illumination in the room flowed in from above. Azusa couldn’t help thinking that it was most befitting the young man as well.

Gento looked into her eyes and said, “Hyota tells me often, but strange things are happening around and to me.”

A peaceful face, Azusa thought. Strange things—strange that she could feel so calm around him. He must have her under his spell.

This was Demon City, after all.

“What you do after this is no concern of mine. Simply answer my questions. And I would beg a bit of your heart.”

Azusa blinked. Gento’s request made no sense to her. *A bit of her heart?*

“Where is Setsura?”

The words suffused into her blood like the fragrant pollen from a bouquet.

“Um, but first,” Azusa said at length, “there’s one thing I need to know.”

“What is that?” said Gento, not at all taken aback.

“You and Setsura-san—what are you intending to do with this city? What is this seal thing?”

“Hoh. You know more than you let on. But I will answer your question. We are, for all intents and purposes, struggling for hegemony of this city. Put in more simple terms, the promise is whoever dies first, the other automatically takes control.”

“Take control of the city? Then what do you do with it?”

“I have no idea,” Gento said readily.

“You have no idea?”

“I do not. Nor was the end game clear from the start. Since Setsura and I were very young, we heard the tale told over and over. But which one of us would rise to preeminence, and afterwards, what astounding things would then take place, is anybody’s guess. Even now it remains little more than conjecture.”

"When you were very young," Azusa echoed blankly. "So you're telling me this was all set in stone that long ago?"

One city had no need of two genies. Supposing that Shinjuku itself was being offered up as the instrument by which the one could extinguish the other, some great mystery or miracle must be in the offing. But what did it mean to seize control of Demon City? And what would happen next?

"And yet despite all that, you two are fighting it out without actually knowing for sure?"

"That is what soldiers do. We are nothing more than the pawns being played on the chess board. Setsura and I have had this conversation before."

"Gento Roran and Setsura Aki—" Azusa muttered in something of a daze.

When—in what era—were the cruel wheels of fate binding these two young and beautiful genies set in motion? And when would they come to rest—and in what shape and form?

Like the wan blue light around them, knowing about an unknowable war and its unforgiving conclusion wrapped Azusa more in sadness than in fear. When all was said and done, what then?

"Stop trying to figure us out or empathize. Simply answer the questions." Gento's voice seeped into her heart like the cool dirt. "Feel the ground beneath you. Do not answer me. Answer the earth. It mingled with my abode for fifteen years. Obstructed by the boorish concrete, it touched the earth directly. I will listen to the earth as well, and extract fiction from fact."

Azusa thought back to her junior high school days, when one of her teachers taught them about Gaia and the Mother of All Creation. All that she was fused into the chill of the soil, became that something else whispering to her blood.

Of other memories, other individuals. The darkness covering them within those cramped confines. And inside, the writhing tentacles of the teaching machine.

Floating white against the curtain of the night, black thread-like lines raked across its face: eyes, a nose and mouth. The face of a man beneath a tousled head of hair—that seemed to disappear into the shroud of darkness. In fact, Azusa soon understood, it had been cleanly severed.

The head of an old man, as easily sixty as a hundred years old. Gento's father.

"The earth is your ally," said the pale lips, "holding fast to the history and knowledge of the Gento clan down to the last drop. You must wear that knowledge like your own clothing. Fifteen years before, you bid farewell to the sound of the wind and the rain, the warmth of the sun, and grasped hold of victory instead. You are no longer the man you once were, capable of destroying the Aki clan in ways I never could. I

know. And so it must be. Because—”

“Because—”

By the time Azusa’s interrogative and the old man’s voice overlapped each other, the darkness had suffused the young woman’s body.

Chapter 3

It was three o'clock in the morning when the doctor got back to the examination room.

This was the time of day when the night made its futile last stand against the impending dawn. A time of day beyond the command of ordinary mortals. The ravenous, twin-headed dogs vanished from the streets, as did the patrol cars of the commando police.

Only once, five minutes before, near the precincts of Hanazono Shrine, had the doctor raised his head toward the sky. "This night is not the night of the falcon."

The beauty of his face as he muttered those words was fairer than that of any fairy princess, who would think herself more akin to the frog in its pond by comparison.

His gaze soon returned to the road ahead, his cape fluttering out behind him.

The room was dark. Entering any of the other exam rooms, a sensor would switch on the lights automatically. But here the doctor's own will ruled over all. In any case, he was a man more suited to the dark than the light.

He sat in a hard chair in front of the desk. A low voice welled up behind him. "I still don't know where you live. You are a man with strange tastes."

The doctor didn't turn around. "Home is where the heart is, isn't that what people say? More importantly, you seem to have run off with the grand prize."

"I've been waiting for you."

With a flick of his right index finger, light sent the dark fleeing. The doctor turned around. He had two patients. A girl wrapped in an ink-black slicker lying on the examination table, and the young man in black sitting in the chair next to her. A face that suffered nothing in comparison to the doctor's own visage.

Setsura Aki.

"You caused quite a commotion," Doctor Mephisto scolded his night visitor. "The spectators rioted. The remaining security guards fanned the flames. Four died. The sponsors will offer up someone's head on a platter to atone for the fiasco. Literally."

"I figured if you were there, all would be well," Setsura said indifferently. Perhaps because he was still *him*, his whole being seemed sheathed in icy steel. "You bring the dead back to life, even when they don't want to. That's why you are the Demon Physician. It'd be no different if *he* showed up at your door."

"I suppose so." A faraway look came to Mephisto's eyes.

"He fled with the giant's corpse and the head of the kenpo master. Add yourself to the mix and what follows isn't that hard to imagine. The question is how *you* will proceed?"

The question being whether he would take Gento up on his proposal.

"I am the Demon Physician," Mephisto answered clearly and plainly. With that, any further discussion on the matter was dispensed with.

"The girl's name is Mayumi." Setsura shifted his gaze to the girl lying on the table, drawing slow and even breaths.

"How do you know that?"

"I called your office, asked if you were seeing any patients presenting with particularly peculiar symptoms."

"And you got a ready answer?"

Setsura nodded. "They are a well-disciplined bunch."

"They need to be more disciplined about divulging the contents of a patient's records. Ah, well. Their standing orders are to go to any lengths to meet your needs. So when will you act similarly out of consideration for *my* needs?"

His eyes sparkled with a devilish, even lascivious light.

Setsura said with a wry smile, "Have you learned anything more about this girl's condition? Seems she sends every man she sleeps with straight to Heaven. And not in a good way."

Mephisto shook his head. Not a speck of that lascivious light was left in those black pupils. "I've made use of every resource I have at my disposal and have still come up empty. Nothing unusual shows up in her DNA."

"Anything in her family tree?"

"I haven't discovered any abnormalities going back two generations. No more data is available from before then."

"If the Demon Physician can't figure it out, I'll have to settle for a Voodoo Doctor. Any thoughts about what is going to happen to her next?"

Mephisto shook his head. That alone was enough to dash his hopes. "Is she the seal?" Mephisto asked, turning his attention to the examination table.

"Ignorance is bliss in my case," Setsura said bluntly.

"I guess I'll have to ask Gento."

"Be my guest. She's all yours."

"That is fine with me. I'll make sure she doesn't end up Gento's."

Not exactly a logical exchange, whether qualified as normal discourse

between the two of them, or normal discourse for Demon City. In either case, neither of them appeared the slightest bit suspicious of the other.

"I'll stop by on a daily basis. Sorry to have to insist, but keep up the investigation."

"That I will."

"Help yourself to my bank account to cover the costs."

"How generous of you. Running a *senbei* shop must be a more profitable enterprise than I imagined."

"Give it a rest." Setsura got to his feet.

"Don't forget your coat. I have a blanket handy."

He plucked up the black slicker and followed Setsura, casting it across his shoulders as he reached the door.

"If you wouldn't mind."

"Mind what?"

Mephisto's hands rested on the shoulders of the visitor. His face drew close to the nape of his neck.



Perhaps no one on earth could imagine such a look of wanton intoxication on such a graceful countenance. The beauty of both of them upset the common sense of the world.

“Hey,” said Setsura, slapping Mephisto’s right hand with his left. Though it might have looked more like the one lay atop the other.

Mephisto’s smile rose to his lips like a pair of rose petals. “What a heartless man you are. Is there not someplace in that *you* of yours that would be taken by some part of *me*?”

“I am only taken by the fact that you are taken by *me*.”

Setsura continued on his way, leaving Mephisto’s hand, the affectionate turn of his fingers, suspended there in the air.

The door opened and closed. The sudden draft buffeted Mephisto’s pale face. The dusky shadows were beginning to fade, the night in its final throes.

“So little time to woo one’s dearly beloved.”

The Demon Physician gazed forlornly out the gray window, before turning to the computer display of the refrigerator containing the body parts he’d retrieved from the Coliseum.

Walking down Yasukuni Avenue, like wending his way through murky ocean depths, Setsura recognized several figures in front of him. He heard them before becoming aware of their brisk movements, the sound of nails being pounded into wood.

Staring through the breaking dawn, he murmured to himself, “Night of the Falcon?”

The cut of his features was unchanged, but this was the nonchalant mien of an ordinary *senbei* shop owner. Not slackening his pace, he passed by the construction site. The men in work clothes were silently erecting what looked like an altar.

Two hours earlier, when Mephisto strode down this same road toward the hospital, the street had been empty. Already the structure was three feet high by ten feet long and wide.

These were fast workers, wearing mask-like expressions as they concentrated on the task at hand, laying down a board, hammering down the nails with a single blow each. Two seconds, two nails. With the metronomic precision of a machine.

Setsura paused. Masked by the echoes of the hammers, he heard something else.

A feral roar.

It came from directly before him. Then from his right, coming down Yamate Street, an exchange of howls.

“Two-headed dogs having breakfast, eh?”

Setsura scratched his head. A second later, from the other side of the lane of asphalt reaching towards Yotsuya—from Yoyogi and Harajuku—from every direction this “boardwalk” seemed intended to reach—they steadily approached.

Four-legged beasts. Dogs. The number of heads didn’t match the

number of bodies. The two-headed dogs of Shinjuku were the most famous of the strange fruit sprouting from those genetic repositories unleashed by the Devil Quake.

Six feet long, some growing as big as nine feet. Brutal in disposition, the natural enemies of all other living things, specializing in unrelenting attacks. Their rugged jaws and diamond-hard teeth could crush concrete. The gouges left in the south wall of the New Isetan department store—where they sharpened their fangs—were testament enough.

Even worse, each of the two heads acted independently from each other, and with a keen intelligence. One could attack from the front, and the other from the side. If a foe faced them from the rear, guaranteed one would be baring its fangs in that direction too.

The dogs formed packs that hid out in abandoned buildings and caverns beneath the piles of debris. Some proved even too violent for the pack and were driven out. These man-eating rogue males prompted extermination drives, though in the more remote neighborhoods and street corners the legs and arms of torn-apart human beings could still be found.

Even commando police in full riot gear could at best hope to inflict enough wounds to discourage them.

Barking and howling in a choir of feral call and response, thirty dogs all but flew down the avenues. A normal person could hold them off for five seconds at most, before being devoured down to the marrow of their bones.

Setsura glanced at the construction workers behind him. “Well, a man’s gotta do—”

With a nonchalant look on his face, as if he’d wandered here from parts unknown with no grasp of the gravity of the situation, he touched his right wrist with his left hand. The teeth marks left by Yamada’s head still marred the skin.

“Probably shouldn’t rely on this. The left will have to do.”

He yawned and stretched and rolled his neck. Pulling these all-nighters was getting to him. He heard a shrill screech and the flapping of feathers. A pair of wings turned through the air directly over his head at the height of the three-story New Isetan department store, lazily tracing a circle in the sky three dozen yards up in the air.

A brown raptor with a wingspan of ten feet. The long, narrow, hooked beak was plainly that of a bird, but this avian species was not only the product of natural selection but of genetic experimentation gone mad.

The fine fur covering the body supported by those wings, down to its stubby legs, resembled that of a wet rat. The black pearl eyes on either side of its small head gazed down at the beasts below with a cruel hunger and loathing.

Loathing. The creatures in this city did not stalk their prey merely to

fill their bellies, but to quench their hatred and anger. Nothing less could be expected from the forces of nature here in Demon City.

There was no need to rush. Let the two-headed dogs tear the flesh apart and lap up the blood and there would be more than enough left over. The bodies of these flying things might be rats, but their instincts were all bird.

Perhaps recognizing the cries and howls echoing between the air and ground, creatures that were a cross between a leech and a frog poked their heads out from the manholes, from behind the stone gates of Hanazono Shrine, mewling and squeaking.

The construction workers kept on working.

The light of dawn was still a long ways off here on Yasukuni Avenue. But the faces of the charging beasts were plain as day. Bloodshot eyes burned like hot coals, fangs jutted from snarling mouths like railroad spikes. Twice the normal number per body. They had smelled human prey. There was no going back now.

The heads suddenly flew into the air. And not only those of the dog in the lead. As the ones behind caught up with the ones in front and sprinted through the same space, their heads went flying as well.

The dogs bounded towards Setsura, headless bodies spraying blood. He waved his arms in annoyance, as if batting away a swarm of flies. The thrashing corpses thumped to the earth.

A fish going under the sashimi cook's knife and then swimming away with only the head and skeleton remaining would be no stranger a sight than these headless dogs.

Setsura Aki had performed no lesser handiwork with his wires.

Spouting fountains of blood, the dogs continued their blind advance on Setsura and the construction workers, before slumping futilely to the pavement. On the verge of colliding with Setsura and the others, there came a sound like grinding steel, as the severed heads gnashed their teeth.

It was hard to say whether the instincts of these creatures or Setsura's skills at dismembering them was more horrifying.

Thirty two-headed dogs lay on the ground, their blood staining the asphalt. The construction workers continued their work on the altar as if nothing had happened.

Setsura looked up at the sky. With a great stir of wings, the black shadows descended upon the dismembered bodies below them and sprang upwards again. The twitching corpses disappeared one after the other.

But even for these huge rulers of the sky, the six-foot-long animals proved too much to handle. Their wings beat the air. They opened their mouths and let go of their spoils. The mutated inheritance of their rat-like legs meant these birds of prey had to rely on their beaks.

Unaccustomed to the situation, some drove their beaks into the

asphalt, producing a shower of blue sparks. When the blood-crazed birds went after the construction workers—covered with the gore from the charging dogs—Setsura flicked his left hand. With a sickly tearing sound wings rent apart, and they frantically beat a retreat from Yasukuni Avenue towards Oume.

The rest gorged themselves and flew off into the dawn sky, becoming small dots on the horizon.

Setsura turned around. With no words of thanks, no words at all, the construction workers simply kept at it with the same monotonous regularity. Their eyes blank, their complexions as pale as their uniforms, they had no idea what they were doing as they did it.

These were living zombies, dosed up with narcotics and industrial strength beta blockers at the ward government building before being dispatched to conduct this extremely dangerous early morning work.

A single round of treatments was said to take a third of a year off a man's life. But the attraction of triple overtime pay meant that there was no shortage of applicants.

Pressed on by the blue light of dawn, Setsura took his leave of them. Even after he left, the construction workers remained consumed by the work at hand, lost in the steady rhythm of hammering nails.

Neither were they the slightest bit interested in what manner of sacrifice would be offered there in the morrow's ceremony.

Part 4: Demon City Downpour

Chapter 1

Setsura didn't return to the safe house. He stopped at a payphone on Yasukuni Avenue. Three minutes later, he hailed a taxi coming from the station and gave the cabbie an address.

He settled back in the seat and closed his eyes. The gas turbine engine whined soothingly in his ears as the car wound between the mountains of debris.

The cabbie was driving in anything but a soothing manner. The tires squealed as he banked through one turn and then the next. Setsura didn't open his eyes. He was aware of the cabbie watching him in the rearview mirror, lips creasing into a smile, before wiping it off his face.

"Hey," he said into his headset. A panel of bulletproof glass insulated the front seat from the back. Setsura didn't react in the slightest. "We're almost there."

Setsura still didn't answer. He seemed sound asleep. The cabbie was licking his lips by then. Nothing but suckers and easy marks flitted their way home first thing in the morning. A man as good-looking as his passenger would sell for a pretty penny at an underground gay bar or host club.

If he put up a struggle, he'd roid up and have himself a free sample before delivering the merchandise. Just imagining the writhing, moaning body was getting him hot and bothered already.

They came to an intersection. The address Setsura had given was on the right. The cabbie made a left. The transmission hummed. He spun the steering wheel.

The taxi turned to the right.

A startled shout rose in his throat. "Left! Freaking piece of shit!" He cranked on the wheel with all his might.

The next intersection approached. He tried to turn the car again. The steering wheel didn't move. He paled, realizing that his own arms were being held down. He had to stop. He raised his foot and stomped down—on the accelerator.

The taxi jackrabbed away from the stop. The green line on the digital speedometer wound hard to the right. Fifty miles per hour, sixty, seventy—the cityscape became a blur outside the windows.

The cabbie shrieked. The car was being driven by somebody that wasn't him, his hands moving in directions he didn't want them to go.

His whole body broke out in a sweat—or more like whatever passed for his soul trying to flee through every pore on his body.

The car came to a halt, and his passenger yawned. “Wow, got here in a hurry. Shinjuku’s private taxis really go above and beyond the call of duty. You take your life in your hands, but the service is first rate.” He covered his mouth with his hand and stifled another yawn. Checking the meter, he expressed surprise. “No fare? A free ride, to boot!”

The cabbie checked it himself. The meter was indeed pegged at zero.

“I’ll be getting out here.”

By this point, the cabbie was barely surprised to find his own hand moving to the lock release and pressing the button. Any inclination to inquire about the strangeness of it all evaporated away.

“Thanks for the lift.” With a polite nod, the young man strode away.

“Hey, wait!” the cabbie called out, happy enough that he still had the ability to speak. “I know it was you that done it! You gotta fix this. I won’t do it again! Promise. C’mon, give me a break.”

The passenger turned around.

“Really?”

“Really. Swear on my mother’s grave.”

“All right, then. But it may sting a little.”

“F-fine. I can take it. Just do it.”

The cabbie felt something thin and narrow being drawn out through the tips of his limbs. The world went black. The pain was indescribable. He pitched forward without so much as a twitch.

Setsura looked down at him with an almost discouraged expression. He raised his left hand in front of his eyes. “There was a time when I would have been impressed with myself. But now I’m not so certain—whether I can beat him or not.”

After a two-minute walk, Setsura came to the mountain of rubble he remembered from before. The remains of Tohan in East Gokencho. In front of it and to the right was the convenience store. Beneath it, Gento was digging out something of utmost importance to him.

Scanning his surroundings, he felt a draft. The wind was picking up. The dawn was ready to rule the day, but dark clouds were already challenging its supremacy, sweeping across the sky over his head. He could almost hear them roaring above him like a smoking steam engine. Shadows raced along beneath his feet.

He paced away from the convenience store. In the distance, the houses and shops were rolling up their shutters. Setsura stopped in front of the mortuary. The shutters were still down. The dirt excavated from beneath the convenience store had been brought here through the tunnel.

A clanking sound came from behind the shuttered doors and

windows. With a painful screech of metal, the shutters began to lift. They were half open when a forty-something woman appeared. The lady from the convenience store. Followed by a middle-aged man. Probably the owner.

The last was a teenage boy. They were all wearing pajamas.

"Welcome, welcome," the lady said, as if gazing upon a movie idol. "I was so hoping you would come back to visit us. Unfortunately, Hyota-san isn't in right now. He left a short time ago with a young woman."

"A young woman?" said Setsura, furrowing his brows.

"That tart of a girl with the sexy body and the big gun."

"Where'd they go?"

"Well. After throwing us a party, she went off with Hyota-san. She's one crazy nympho bitch. Sure knows how to go down on a man and take it in the face. A real pro."

"Oh, for God's sake," Setsura sighed. "An evil brood."

"So the word's gotten around already?" said the man, scratching his bony chest, his left hand tucked into the waistband of his pajama bottoms. "If so, then there's no way you can leave."

"Are we gonna kill him?" the teenager asked with glittering eyes.

"Patience, patience," the mother said, patting him on the head. "This is not the place. Let's go in the back."

The boy had already done an about face. "This way," said the father, pulling his hand out of his waistband. He was holding what looked like a silver fountain pen, except there was a hole where the nib should be. The hole was the size of a .22 caliber bullet, though the lack of rifling suggested it fired a tiny missile.

The three-inch weapon could penetrate the body armor worn by commando police. A built-in laser guidance system made evasion impossible.

Setsura did as he was told without protest, and went around to the back of the house. A section of land had subsided there, revealing a concrete slab. The basement of the building.

"Thanks to this, this dig has been one big pain in the ass." The father sounded bitter.

"Hey, don't go flapping your lips in front of him."

"What's the problem? He's going to die here anyway."

"You didn't ask Hyota for details?" Setsura said to him.

"About what?"

"Oh, nothing. So, how far has the excavation gone?"

"It's done already."

"You're done?" A hard edge crept into his voice.

"We hauled it out thirty minutes before you arrived. The mortuary owner took it away. Who knows where? At any rate, now we go our separate ways."

The woman said with a sarcastic smile, "Irreconcilable differences,

you know.”

“Then you’d better be on your way, wouldn’t you say? There’s nothing to be gained from picking a fight with me.”

“Oh, we already got paid to get rid of you. Though it’s looking like a lot of money for nothing now.”

“Hyota, eh?” Setsura said, mostly to himself.

The man nodded. “One little nasty son of a bitch you don’t want to mess with.”

“I asked before, but Hyota had nothing more to say?”

“About what?” the woman asked suspiciously.

“No matter,” Setsura softly intoned. “Let’s get it on, then.”

In response to that quiet invitation, the wicked vibe swirling around the three condensed into solid intent.

The teenager took one step forward. “I’ll take care of him.”

The ground crunched beneath his synthetic leather flip-flops. He cocked his foot back behind him. A second later, his right hand slashed upwards. A tearing sound brushed by Setsura’s ear. A black hole opened up in the concrete wall behind him.

The teenager gaped. Flying forward at a hundred and twenty miles per hour, the nail embedded in the heel of the sandal should have hit Setsura right between the eyes.

“Missed,” Setsura said, like the kid was shooting spitballs at him.

“Out of the way! I’ll take care of the bastard!”

The father’s growl was drowned out by a shrill shriek. A blue-white flame trailing behind it, the mini-missile streaked at Setsura.

The nose suddenly pitched up.



The man yelled in surprise. Setsura danced through the air, the hems of the slicker spreading out like the wings of a demonic bird of prey. The coattails folded together with a *snap*, and the next moment they separated—Setsura and his slicker.

He rounded his back and hugged his knees. The coat spread out like a black stain. The missile chose its mark and shot through the fabric, spitting out its tongue of fire.

Setsura landed softly on the ground in front of the man, who'd finally figured out what had happened. The man raised his foot, snapping it like a whip at Setsura's head.

The heel grazed Setsura's nose—the heel of a foot no longer connected to the ankle. Setting down the smooth stump on the ground, slick with the spouting blood, now sans the foot, the man stumbled forward like missing a step.



The kid *clucked* to himself, and turned around and ran, leaving the woman behind. He probably didn't feel the red line tracing down his back until after he dodged between the boulders and disappeared from view.

Setsura turned to the man writhing on the ground and the woman standing there still unharmed. "You know what it means to be hoist by your own petard?"

The woman nodded. "Yeah. That bastard Hyota meant you to do us in."

"I suspect he was hoping for some mutually assured destruction," Setsura said, glancing down at the spreading pool of gore like it was an inconvenient mud puddle. "It seems he didn't acquaint you with my particular skills. A pity."

"No way that bastard's getting away with this, jerking us around like that." She glared at the skies, her trembling, upturned eyes reflecting the shimmering blue. "You want to kill me, too? The wound on the kid's back—the blood's not going to stop, is it?"

"One way or another."

"I get it. The blood's gonna keep flowing. That can't go on long before you're dead and gone. Just deserts for raising a hand against the likes of you. But let me even the scales first."

"Even the scales?"

"Give me this one break so I can pay this Hyota bastard back. If I'm going to die anyway, there's no sense wasting that death. This guy too,

the kid too, we've got chemistry, you know. You know the law of the evil broods?"

Setsura nodded. As long as they lived as a family, they would deport themselves as a real and loving family. Thus the parents would revenge the loss of a child, the child revenge the loss of his parents. Pretend parents prowled the streets of Shinjuku dealing justice to the killers of their pretend children.

"That means you are going to find Hyota before the next time we meet."

"That's what it means," the woman said, looking him in the eye. And it meant as well that the next time they met, the one would kill the other without mercy. "This is one I owe you, then," she said, and turned around and walked away.

Setsura watched her disappear amidst the rubble, complaining of her aches and pains and the bad hand of cards life had dealt her. And then another roll of thunder turned his attention to the heavens and the distant black clouds.

"Dammit, Gento," Setsura grumbled. "When are you making your next move?"

Chapter 2

The clouds Setsura had seen at dawn lingered over the city, waiting until noon to fill the air with streaks of silver.

Rain.

A Shinjuku rain.

A Demon City downpour.

Residents and tourists alike immediately sought shelter beneath roofs and eaves. What everybody who lived knew about the rain was clearly spelled out in the tourist guidebooks.

Fifteen years before, the Japan Meteorological Agency hemmed and hawed and finally came up with a term that most accurately described the phenomenon: *phantom-infused precipitation*.

According to the guidebooks, “When it rains, do not under any circumstances get close to holes, cracks, fissures or exposed raw earth.”

A drunk climbed a pile of debris in Kabuki-cho. The thick smell of alcohol filled the air around him, with each step the odors overlapping like the layers of a translucent painting, flowing along and twining together again.

His blood alcohol level right then was about a hundred and eight proof. Until a few minutes ago, he’d been imbibing “Shinjuku Spirits” in a bar behind the Koma Theater. That was the beginning of his problems. There was nothing wrong with distilled spirits. They were sold everywhere, though at thirty percent higher prices than outside the ward.

Shinjuku Spirits went for a tenth that. A cup of the stuff could be had for fifty yen. It didn’t taste half bad, either. With a mild taste and texture and a quirky aroma that hit the spot, this refined sake competed with the best.

It delivered a quick buzz—regardless of how much or little was imbibed—in less than two minutes. No matter how much was imbibed, there was never a hangover.

Everybody from carping food critics to the hard-drinking hoi polloi acclaimed it as a drink for the masses. But visit any drinking hole in the city and that label would be found nowhere on the shelves.

The reason for that was simple: if it was, the cops would be busting down doors before the day was done.

The reason for that was simple, too: this ten proof booze, with the pleasantly intoxicating effects of name-brand, had as its principal ingredient *rain*. The rain that fell on Shinjuku, on Demon City. The rain that was ninety-nine percent phantom-infused precipitation.

However the barfly was aware of the falling rain, he couldn't flee the scene.

Five years before, he had undergone strength-enhancing surgery. He was confident he could go toe-to-toe with a brown bear. The rain showered down on him, its unique properties bit by bit soaking his body.

If he'd been a normal man, these concentrations would have little effect on him. But as he was imbibing fifty gallons of the stuff a year, eighty-five percent of it as Shinjuku Spirits, the results could vary a lot from the normal.

He was a looter of sorts, a dumpster diver. He plunged into the depths of these oceans of wreckage and debris—that others could not hope to reach—and retrieved lost items and valuables. For himself.

He had no scruples about robbing these makeshift graves either, especially if the body was that of a rich man. A diamond ring, a cash card, a solid gold necklace—any one of them would keep him happy as a clam for the next six months.

But even he feared the rain.

One more search, he told himself, and he'd hightail it out of there. But he wasn't going to make it. The mountains of brick and cinderblock around him shook and shimmered. Creatures shaped like dark green rods splashed from beneath the concrete slabs and rose into the air.

A moment later, bumpy nodules covering them opened outwards, forming the wide blades of poisonously green leaves.

The world around him transformed into a verdant field. The luxuriant weeds stood six feet tall, reaching the height of the man. Sensing his body heat, the stalks flexed and bent. The blowholes at the tips spit out fine filaments.

A sweet fragrance filled the air. Green lines wrapped around the man's neck. These feelers were certainly part and parcel of the vegetation.

Threads that at a glance seemed slender and weak proved as strong as reinforced nylon. This man, who possessed the strength of fifty, could not easily extract himself.

Other plants lassooed his hands and feet. The typical prisoner of these carnivorous plants would slowly starve to death. In time, the body would decay. The feelers would absorb the nutrients needed to sustain them.

In this horrifying case, though, the worst was far sooner to come. The

blowholes trembled and spewed a honey-like fluid over the man. Smaller droplets squirmed and fidgeted inside the clear viscous clumps that coated him, as the tiny lumps burrowed into his skin.

The fluid must be a kind of incubating medium. The same way flowers cast pollen to the wind to extend the reach of their life force, these weeds coated the skin of entrapped humans with seeds and fertilizing fluids, which burrowed through the flesh and embedded their buds there.

The fate that awaited the human was to become the pot for the plant. Here and there amidst the rubble, peeking out from the fissures and cracks, were the half-mummified bodies, the desiccated corpses of men and women.

This man, though, was no inattentive pedestrian or naive tourist. The medical augmentations he'd undergone five years before came to the fore. He flexed his muscles with all his might and unleashed all the power in his internal organs.

A muscular energy density of .01 horsepower per gram yielded six hundred horsepower that overwhelmed the combined efforts of the plants. Raising a guttural scream, he tore out the feelers by the roots.

The exhausted, wilting stalks coughed up more of the translucent liquid as the rain streaked down. The rest of the weeds fared no better. They had met their match.

"Fucking freaks," the man wheezed. Today just wasn't going to be his day.

Speaking of which, tomorrow was the Night of the Falcon. The man raised his scowling face towards the weeping heavens and climbed down the mountain.

His feet slipped out from under him. He fell on his ass with a heavy *plop*. Green moss coated the soles of his shoes. The concrete beneath his feet was covered with green. Only where his feet had tread showed the gray skin of the earth.

Fields of green reached as far as the eye could see. Those weeds were everywhere, sprouting up, their shimmering, wavering feelers on the hunt and in search of food.

The man clambered to his feet. In that moment, his number finally came up. The years of imbibing Shinjuku Spirits bore fruit.

A separate sense of will blossomed inside his head. Amidst the shadows and darkness, he felt a keen and unfettered burst of aspiration. He whirled around. Everything in his life up to now had been a waste of his time. There was only one place for him to go, one place that he should be.

Arriving back at the peak of the mountain, the man carefully removed the bricks and shattered cinderblocks, creating a space just big enough for his body to fit.

The mummies on either side stared at him with their hollow eyes and

almost seemed to smile. The man smiled back at them, his most genuine expression of emotion in years, and laid his body down between them.

Here was the reason Shinjuku Spirits was banned even in this city. The phantom-infused precipitation implanted a will within that hearkened only to the call of the monsters without.

Rain, rain, go away.

A tide of red flowers unfurled from the cracks in the streets. Rainbow-colored mushrooms sprouted on the sides of buildings. The rain-soaked city blossomed to life in all its luxuriant gory glory.

Come again another day.

Dodging the downpour, shortly after noon a small man arrived at the front lobby of Mephisto Hospital. Even without seeing the face beneath the long hair that reached his waist, from the way his body was bent forward like a hinge, this was clearly Hyota.

He told the receptionist the reason for his visit and was promptly shown to an examination room. Where Mephisto was waiting.

“You must be the servant of Gento Roran, the man I met at the Coliseum.”

“That is correct.” Hyota bowed. He was already so twisted over that from the back, the gesture seemed to make his head completely disappear.

“So, how can I help you?”

“If you would accompany me—”

“Right away?”

“As soon as possible.”

Mephisto glanced out the window. “A house call in the rain. It’s been a while.”

“I truly appreciate it.” Hyota bowed again.

“There is something I must tend to first.”

Mephisto smiled. Hyota blanched a bit. There was something about that face that sent a chill down even his warped spine. It was not *evil* that suffused the smile that rose to those lips, but a far more fundamental source of dread and awe.

Not even that genie Setsura Aki, himself a child of the darkness, along with Gento Roran, could muster up such a smile. This was Doctor Mephisto, after all. Perhaps the very devil himself.

“What do you wish me to do?” Hyota said, unable to suppress the slight tremble in his voice. This frightening man himself was more frightened than when he’d encountered Setsura in the Golden Gai.

“There’s a little conflict I wish to settle.”

Hyota had guessed as much. His shaken features grew all the paler. Fighting Mephisto as well had never been in the cards. And yet a ruddy glow crept into his eyes.

"There's no need to fret so. I have no desire to come to blows with you," Mephisto smiled again.

"You don't?"

"Last night, two of our colleagues interrupted a hallowed competition and carried off the prize as well. That upset some folks. They have me under surveillance. I'd like you to take care of it."

"Understood," Hyota said at once, like an executive secretary arranging for a car to pick up the company president.

Except that the men Setsura and Gento had "upset" at the Coliseum were hardly the typical fight promoters. More like the godfathers of their own gangs. When they put their efforts into a task, they should be able to track down the slipperiest suspect.

They'd concluded it was Mephisto that helped make Setsura look like a corpse. It was only natural that they'd view him with equal suspicion.

"Setsura and your master can fend for themselves. I, on the other hand, have no retainers of my own. Perhaps I could get you to do a little bodyguard work?"

"A piece of cake. And where are these troublesome insects?"

Mephisto gestured with his right hand. A portion of the wall turned into a snapshot of the real world, the holographic monitor.

"On the street in front of the hospital."

Hyota focused his gaze. Behind the hair hanging down to his chin, his eyes narrowed to barely more than slits.

Kuyakusho Street. The camera slowly panned to the left, past a row of restaurants, revealing two men in suits in the adjacent alley. They were looking at the hospital with reptilian eyes. The camera stopped.

"Them?"

Mephisto nodded.

"It will take but a minute. But—"

"But—?"

"Kill two cockroaches and there will soon be a thousand more just like them."

"I couldn't care less. The problem is not those two in particular, but your particular skills."

"You will have no reason to be dissatisfied with those skills."

Hyota left the examination room and returned to the lobby. Outside it was raining. Crushed beneath his feet, the rusty red flowers gasped out puffs of crimson pollen. The rain grew heavier, the spray flying off his body. He practically disappeared, obscured by the mist surrounding him.

A plastic awning sheltered the alley where the men were waiting. These canopies had been erected by the ward government. Several other pedestrians had taken shelter there as well.

The two men stood at the entrance to the alley. The slicked-back hair of one was parted over his left temple. The other had his hair parted over the right. Each was holding an umbrella.

Hyota stopped in front of them. Their eyes flicked downwards in a *what the hell* expression. Outside Shinjuku, the weirdness of the scene would have been overwhelming. Here it was barely out of the ordinary.

“Yeah?” said the one with the hair parted on the left.

Hyota peered up at him. “Come with me,” he said.

He spoke in subdued tones, his voice rising up like a ghostly miasma. But the men clearly heard him. Mr. Left Part lowered his hips and settled down in a boxing stance. The bulge in his black suit under his left shoulder was clearly that of a gun. But he was the type who preferred to settle disagreements with his bare hands.

Mr. Right Part stood there, not moving.

Hyota turned and proceeded toward Kabuki-cho. If these punks had class to match their threads, they would follow him.

They didn’t.

Right Part made the first move. Holding the umbrella with a reverse grip, he charged at Hyota, aiming for the back of his neck.

Hyota scooted forward. The tip of the umbrella slashed through empty air, striking a stone on the sidewalk and cleaving it in two. The tip of the umbrella was made of ballistic-grade synthetic polymer. Considering the force behind it, the man had to be heavily juiced.

Hyota came to a halt. “So, a swordsman, eh?”

Right Part raised the umbrella in an *en garde* stance. Left Part circled around Hyota, blocking any attempt to retreat.

As the rain pounded down on them, the two men might have already realized the folly of engaging this particular opponent. So low to the ground, their well-honed fighting stances grew stiff and overextended.

Hyota rose no higher than the man’s waist, forcing him to bend over all the more to get within striking distance. Whether fighting hand-to-hand or with a sword, striking at an opponent lower in height than the outstretched arm diminished the power and speed of a blow.

With a rebel yell, Right Part charged at him, drawing back the umbrella to the right as he kicked up his left foot. A black mass flashed through the air like a shooting star, all but searing the air.

Hyota soared skywards. The shooting star flew towards his face. Right Part’s kick had sent his shoe flying. Go high or go low and one was guaranteed to connect. A perfectly timed attack.

Seeing his shoe strike home, Right Part stabbed the umbrella at Hyota’s midsection, a killing blow.

The shoe came to a sudden halt right below Hyota’s nose. Hyota grabbed it in his mouth. The umbrella thrust wavered. No resistance met the jab, the tip transmitting only a slight impact.

Right Part stared harder. Hyota perched on top of the umbrella. Right

Part let go of it. Hyota jumped backwards. Startled, Left Part retreated as well, his faith in his partner's abilities badly shaken.

Hyota was faster.

Left Part didn't wait to get his legs under him before throwing a right jab. Hyota spun around, planted his hands on Left Part's head, and vaulted over him, at an almost leisurely speed.

By the time he'd stuck the dismount—as well as any gymnast—his two opponents had splashed face-down onto the sidewalk.

The rain engulfing his body like a cloak, without a backwards glance, Hyota ran back to Mephisto Hospital.



Creepy creatures converged on the two dead men from all directions. Then the scene went gray and winked out. With a flick of his fingers, Mephisto turned off the monitor and instructed the electronics to store

the images for future reference.

Hyota entered the room a minute later and bowed.

“Quite the performance. I knew from the first moment we met that you were far from the ordinary.”

“I appreciate your kind words.”

Mephisto announced through the intercom that he was going out. They proceeded to the front foyer, Hyota in front. The world outside was muddled and misshapen behind the haze of rain, stained with a rainbow of eerie hues.

“Climb on board.”

“What?”

“Piggyback. It is much faster than a taxi.”

“Fascinating.”

Mephisto did as Hyota asked. Hyota set off running. Wherever they were headed, the sudden intensity of the wind and rain notwithstanding, the curious shape of the two of them soon disappeared out of view.

Chapter 3

Setsura furrowed his brows and grumbled, “Still no good.”

In front of him was a human figure covered with a slippery substance. The mannequin was coated with the custom-made oil. The same compound that covered Hyota’s body.

Here was the reason he’d failed a second time to fell his foes. Hyota in Golden Gai. Then Gento in Shinjuku Gardens. Devil wires that could slice through tempered steel slid off this oil and vectored harmlessly away.

He had no other way to permanently take out Hyota and Gento.

Since returning to his safe house that morning, in a monotonous exercise in trial and error, he’d given it a thousand more tries on top of the ten thousand to date.

No matter what the angle or speed of the attack, he couldn’t get past the oil coating to the body beneath. No satisfactory solution had presented itself yet. Setsura had no recourse but to keep on trying.

After more than a thousand attempts without a rest, his left arm was beginning to burn. “Might as well try the right.”

Setsura had to be adept in wielding the devil wires with both hands. And yet small discrepancies were showing up in his almost supernatural abilities.

Ever since Yamada’s skull sank its teeth into his arm, he’d been favoring his right hand and playing it safe. He flexed his fingers. The index finger to the ring finger were fine. The reflexes in the pinky, though, proved a smidgen less reactive, not that a normal person would notice. But it checked the limits of his abilities.

Setsura examined the teeth marks in his wrist. The wounds weren’t deep, but there might be further damage. This was why he couldn’t keep Gento from escaping the Coliseum.

Setsura pinched his right forefinger and thumb together, measuring the diameter of a devil wire that no one else could even see. The tips of the slender digits could detect the diameter of the sub-micron thin titanium wire.

“The threads are at the limits. Everything else depends on my own skills.”

A knock came at the door. A familiar sound. Setsura opened the door without answering. He was met by a big fat frame wearing round black-

rim glasses. Yoshiko Toya walked in, huffing and puffing as loud as a steam engine, her body quivering like a bowl full of jelly.

“What’s up?”

She wiped the back of her neck with a handkerchief and drew an exaggerated breath. Moving her almost two hundred and fifty pounds a dozen yards was as exhausting as a marathon. It took her a good five minutes until she was ready to say anything.

“I got some messages for you.”

“Who from?”

“All kinds. One syndicate in particular. They figured out who you were by the way you fought. They’re on the warpath, and they promise to draw and quarter you when they find you. You really must have thrown a monkey wrench into that high-falutin’ murder show of theirs. They’re plenty pissed.”

“Good grief,” Setsura muttered, nodding to himself. “Who’s the godfather in charge of this particular bunch?”

“Tosuke Kokonori.”

“Hmm. He runs the Shinjuku Restoration Society. Am I the only one they’re gunning for?”

“No. One more. Nobody knows exactly who this chap is, but my gut—and I’m never wrong—points to Gento Roran.”

“What brings you to that conclusion?”

“My gut, I told you.”

Setsura peered curiously at the puffy, round face. If he didn’t know better, he’d think she was nothing more than a tenement landlady haggling over the price of radishes at the local greengrocer—not Shinjuku’s best information broker.

She wasn’t just there to deliver a message from the crime syndicate. She was telling *him* about *them*. And yet no one ever got to her, made a threat that stuck. She didn’t use a single computer. But the word on the street was that anybody who messed with her would never sleep easy in Shinjuku again.

“Then this excavation business.”

“Yeah.”

“Seems the people behind the scenes are at last making their moves. A hearse pulled up in front of the Fuji Television studios.”

“What about the driver?”

“Not bound to be one.”

“Figures.”

“I’m all for cutting to the chase and all, but cruising around Fuji TV in the middle of the night is a real bad idea. Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy.” Yoshiko clapped her fat hands together and intoned an earnest Buddhist prayer.

Setsura said, “Meaning nobody’s dumb enough to sidle up to the Fuji TV lobby and take a look.”

Yoshiko hiked up her brows. "Damned right."

"I was thinking of heading over there myself."

"But that's where—"

"All the more reason to go to where the treasure is buried." He glanced at the door. "You bring them here on purpose?"

"Yeah," Yoshiko nodded. Her quadruple chin shook like a turkey's wattles. "They've been hanging around the place. The customers don't notice, but it got me worried. Thought I might as well lead them here so you could deal with them in one fell swoop."

"You couldn't wait until I took care of business with this Kokonori fellow?"

"The sooner the better."

Setsura gestured to his right. Yoshiko looked at where he was pointing and frowned.

"Afraid you won't fit?"

"You're a cruel man."

Setsura watched with an intrigued expression as Yoshiko approached the bathroom. She opened the door and stopped, apparently estimating the width of the door frame.

The young *senbei* shop owner didn't avert his eyes, watching with the intense curiosity of a behavioral psychologist. Yoshiko hesitated, before resolving herself and plowing straight ahead.

She'd barely taken a step when she stopped again and glanced back at Setsura. Now he airily turned his gaze elsewhere.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

"I'm sure you find this all very interesting."

"No need to get testy."

"What are you really thinking? Out with it."

"I have to say, I've never been so intrigued by the sight of someone walking into a bathroom."

Yoshiko Toya frowned and faced the door again. She stepped inside. And stopped a third time. Her hips—her ample butt, to be precise—had caught in the door jamb.

"What's the problem?" Setsura asked, eyes bright, smothering a smile. Though he was not one to usually find humor in the travails of others.

"You can damn well see with your own two eyes," Yoshiko fumed.

"What if you turned sideways?" Setsura proposed, with a totally straight face.

"I can't move. Get me out."

"I was wondering when this day would come," Setsura said, as if it were a question for the ages. "I truly intend to, but don't have the time. You'll have to stay that way for now. The guests you brought along have arrived."

“Get me out of here!”

Yoshiko wriggled and struggled, but her ass remained stubbornly glued to the frame. Setsura turned toward the door to the apartment. The lock released with a dull click. A split second later, the door cracked open. A silver tube rolled across the floor and erupted in a cloud of gas.

Setsura jumped up from the foot of the bed, slumped to his knees on the floor, clawed at his throat and crumpled forward. Still stuck in the door, Yoshiko grew quiet as a kitten.

Three minutes later, the door slowly opened wider. Three men wearing dark suits and gas masks burst into the room holding Winchester “Cruiser” submachine guns in their hands.

The popular assault rifle was designed for close-quarters combat and held fifty rounds of caseless ammunition in the magazine. Winchester officially sold the gun to police forces and military organizations, but competing head-to-head with the German H&K and the Czech-model Uzi, generous inventories found their way to the black market.

Though within a dozen foot radius, the model of the gun didn’t much matter. A one second burst of eight rounds would pretty much tear any living thing to shreds.

“Well, that was easy,” said one of the men, his voice barely muffled by the gas mask.

“Just to make sure, once he’s dead, we’d better take the body along. Yo, give him a round each to finish him off.”

“Got it.” The three nodded in unison and aimed their weapons.

“Hold on,” said the first. “What’s that weird-looking broad doing there?”

“What the hell? She human? That’s one fat pig.”

“That information broker. She’s stuck. Hey, it’s real live *Looney Tunes*.”

“Leave her be. Stick to business. No freebies.”

They again leveled the muzzles of their guns. A second later, two of them reeled around, eyes wide, bodies turned into human honeycombs, riddled with 9 mm caseless Luger rounds.

“Sorry about that.” The gas having already dissipated from the room, Setsura rose to his feet like a ghost. “I can make a dead man dance, including the living dead.”

Setsura’s necrodancing technique.

Just as a single strand of devil wire could control the nerves and muscles of the recently departed and bring the dead back to a false life, so could those same threads transform those same tissues into a perfect facsimile of lifelessness. Hence a literal living death.

Setsura had played possum, stilling his heart and pulse and lungs, the flow of blood through his veins, while keeping his brain functioning and retaining full control of the devil wires.

This was undoubtedly the means by which he’d sprung back to life in

the Coliseum infirmary after being injected with the cryo-preservation fluid.

“How about you take me to visit your boss? You drive.”

The sight of the young man’s countenance, as calm as if being caressed by a spring breeze, stole the words from the assassin’s mouth. A moment later, his entire body was twined in devil wire, the same that made him turn his gun on his accomplices.

“I’m sure you came by car. Let’s take a ride to Fuji TV.”

Setsura pointed toward the door. Still cradling the assault rifle, the assassin walked forward with barely an unsteady step.

Leaving the apartment, Setsura cast a sideways glance at the bathroom door where Yoshiko Toya was still stuck, softly snoring. “The hell of it is, she’s going to wake up sometime. What to do, what to do—”

“Hmph.” A sound like that massive ass was answering for her. She was no ordinary fatso either. “Hey! Get me out of here!”

“It’ll take time. Wait until I get back. I’ll bring along a crane. Or a backhoe.”

“This is the last time I’m doing business with you!”

Setsura flicked his right hand.

“Ouch! Shit!” she cried out. Yoshiko reared back. With a *pop* like a champagne cork, her ass heaved out of the door frame.

“Given the proper motivation, people can do the most surprising things.”

“I’m gonna remember this!”

Carrying his one possession—the suitcase—Setsura left the room without a backwards glance.

Then on to Kawadacho and what was left of the Fuji TV studios. Something was waiting for them there—something that would even make a woman as stouthearted as Yoshiko Toya tremble in fear and invoke divine providence.

Part 5: Bureau of Magical War

Chapter 1

Shadows covered the land, the shadows cast by the surrounding buildings. Wherever they fell, the residents of Kawadacho scowled, raised their faces towards the heavens and cursed their misfortune.

Not because these shadows aroused supernatural physical phenomena like those of the Government Freezer in North Shinjuku. But simply because they blocked the sun and presaged the inevitable night.

The longest reached almost two hundred feet, covering a stretch of land occupied by eight hundred people.

Nevertheless, as the earth revolved in concert with the sun, those who chose to abide in the kingdom carved out by these shadows turned their eyes skyward with disgust and spat contemptuously on the ground.

For the past ten years, a grotesque creature had made its nest there. Repeated eradication campaigns hadn't exterminated or driven it away, and it stubbornly remained. An awareness of its presence alone left the residents of Kawadacho in a permanent state of unease.

Even when the car carrying Setsura Aki came to a halt on the street, wrapped in the wan darkness, they stared instead up through the dense damp fog.

"Thanks for the ride," Setsura said to the driver with a friendly smile. The driver, of course, was one of the three assassins who'd assaulted him in his safe house. It was easier than calling a taxi.

Only his hands and feet could move freely. Every other part of him was immobilized by a stabbing pain penetrating down to his bones. These were the same devil wires that like a magic marionette had turned his gun on his fellow conspirators in Setsura's safe house.

"Tell you what, escort me the rest of the way and you'll be free to go."

Setsura poked his arm out the window and pointed at a building of postmodern design perched on a slight rise, almost hidden behind the smoky haze.

The driver blanched. A fear separate from the pain froze the blood in his veins.

"Fine, then. You'd better beat a fast retreat and sleep it off while *I* am still *me*. Next time somebody asks you to do a job like that, you can tell them honestly that you'd rather die. I'll be paying your boss a visit before long."

He got out of the car. Sporting the face of a dead man, the driver sped off, twice as fast as when they'd arrived.

Setsura set forth, the rain drumming down. On the wide street before him, across Yasukuni Avenue, was the Akebono Bridge Station on the old Toei Shinjuku line. The gates yawned wide open.

He glanced to the right. There was only the bridge on East Gaien Street between Yotsuya Sanchome, Ushigome Yanagicho and Waseda Tsurumaki. And that was the Akebono Bridge.

The original span came down in the Devil Quake. What stood there now was built six months later. Forty-five men died laying the pilings, remembered by forty-five granite stones lining the footings of the bridge.

Setsura crossed Yasukuni Avenue. The traffic was light, people and vehicles alike. Now and then a hausfrau darted across, deliberately averting her gaze from some unknown quarter.

He turned down a lane. There was a ramen restaurant on the left, a tea house on the right. The street was lined with shops and arcades, mostly prefab units built after the Devil Quake. He'd gone a dozen more yards when a woman's taut voice reached his ears.

"Say something, Chie. C'mon, say something. It can't be true that *those* eyes are on you."

In front of a coin laundry on the right, a woman in her fifties clung to a girl of twenty-five or six, shaking her by the shoulders. The fingers dug into her flesh. With each push and shove, the girl's neck swayed back and forth, flinging drops of water into the air.

The girl's buxom figure and voluptuous visage were aglow with a rapturous joy. Her face alone was turned toward that place that everybody was doing their best to pretend wasn't there.

Whatever was there, Setsura alone strode straight in that detested direction.

The pedestrian shopping street ended. The small hill rose up above him. The cracked concrete paving revealed the dark earth beneath. The reconstruction efforts here after the Devil Quake had long ago slowed to a crawl.

In the third official restoration plan it had gotten as far as being designated a high priority redevelopment area before being abandoned, left as is, becoming one of those landmarks emblematic of Demon City.

Even so, not a single sightseer now stepped in front of Setsura or followed the shattered stone stairway to the top. According to the *Demon City Tourist Guide*, "The following places and locations are to be avoided at all costs—"

As Setsura started up the hill, a single tourist stared dumbfounded as the black figure passed by him, and then set off with all due haste, repeatedly rubbing his eyes. And not because he was impressed by what a handsome young man he was.

1. Shinjuku Chuo Park.

Setsura looked down. The stone steps beneath his feet were grimy and black, the oily soot left behind by a flamethrower. Here were the remains of previous eradication campaign efforts—to rid the world of what kept coming down.

He kept going up.

2. Shinjuku Station on the Seibu Shinjuku Line.

Five steps later, a huge fissure—easily ten feet across—again brought him to a halt. The runoff spilled into it like a waterfall. Setsura sprang off the stone steps with his right foot. And lightly landed on the stop above, the tails of his slicker flapping like a giant raptor.

He'd crossed the rest of the way. The giant structure rose up above him from these commanding heights, lording over all it surveyed. Here was the ruler of the shadows of Kawadacho.

3. Fuji TV.

Setsura circled around to the front lobby.

Around the building, parts crushed and fallen in, riven with cracks like all the rest, was stretched a fence of steel netting. The handiwork of the Self-Defense Forces. Rusty in some places, in others bright and gleaming, evidence of at least eight visits by the SDF.

Next to the front entrance sat a rusty round tower. A large-capacity electrical generator with “JGSDF” (Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces) stenciled on the side. They'd obviously had to beat a fast retreat.

For two months, the fence around the television studio had been charged to two hundred thousand volts, keeping whatever was inside from getting out. The gaping holes in the fence made clear the futility of that effort.

The wires had been twisted and torn and pushed outwards.

Without a moment's hesitation, Setsura stepped inside the fence. The warm moist air surrounded him, a sticky agglomeration of tiny droplets. The same temperature as the air, but with the unpleasant sensation of the skin being covered with a thin film of oil.

Standing there, the world around him seemed to glaze over, grow listless and muddy.

In front of the lobby leading to the main news bureau was something altogether appropriate to its current state. A hearse. And not a scratch on it. Parked there placidly, like it was the most ordinary thing in the

world, making the weirdness lurking beneath that calm exterior all the more so.

No one blithely drove a car right up to the Fuji TV studios. Here, nothing could be stranger than the ordinary.

The doors of the hearse were all open, including those in the back. The vehicle was empty. No casket, no driver. Beneath the front seat was a machine pistol, a Magnum .45 “Grizzly,” a slightly larger version of the Colt Government M1 11A1.

True to its nickname, the Magnum carried the heaviest load available for a .45 round, but there was no evidence of this one being fired.

Setsura checked the breechblock. The thumb safety was off and the hammer was cocked. Not something any man did for shits and giggles. He’d need a damned good reason to pull the trigger on such a big gun in the small confines of a car—like sweating bullets and fearing for his own life.

Setsura engaged the safety. Tucking the three-pound weapon into his pocket, he stepped into the production bureau foyer without a second glance. The dusty floor was littered with the gleaming brass of spent cartridges. A hundred at least. Somebody had really come loaded for bear. The walls were pockmarked.

But this was no ordinary shootout.

Setsura flicked the rain off his slicker and wiped his face with his sleeve. Approaching the reception area he took a left, down the corridor deeper inside to the production bureau.

Here were more shell casings. An assault rifle was lying on the floor. It was a Model 89, produced domestically to replace the much derided standard-issue Model 64. A dark stain spread out on the floor beneath it. It looked like a blood stain at first, except the edges were dark blue.

“My, my, my,” Setsura murmured to himself. The first words he’d said aloud so far. His boyish face twisted into a bored grimace, as if fed up with a prank taken too far.

“The sound stages in that place are plenty big,” Setsura had pointed out. “Where do you figure he’s hiding out?”

After dispatching two of the three assassins who’d attacked him in his safe house and making the third his driver, he’d dropped Yoshiko Toya off along the way.

“I haven’t got a clue either,” Yoshiko said, scratching her three-foot-wide butt. “Yeah, it’s a big place. He’s gotta be somewhere in there. He wouldn’t have gone in otherwise.”

“The critter escaped from the Ichigaya Research Center,” Setsura said. “Are you saying he was already that big?”

“Naw. Word is he camped out in the Kawadacho sewers and SDF warehouses, didn’t resort to the television sound stage until he’d

reached a good sixty feet.”

“What about now?”

“A hundred feet at least.”

There was a floor map on the wall to his right. Setsura checked his location against that of the sound stage and started off again.

He'd taken note of how uncomfortably hot and humid the air was. Perhaps he even heard the faint reverberations of an air conditioner. At any rate, some mechanical device was purring away somewhere.

He passed down several hallways before coming to a large room with walls of glass on his right. “Public Relations” said the sign on the board. Without breaking stride, he went inside.

And quickly crouched down.

Two beats later came the sound of gunfire. The bullet passed eighteen inches over his head and struck the window of the manager's office. Right at the height his head had been. The shooter's timing was off but his aim was true.

Still in a crouch, Setsura waited. The PR office door opened. A man jumped in cradling a rifle. With strangely sluggish movements, the muzzle of the gun drew a bead on Setsura.

Then his body froze. Like a wind-up robot running down, his limbs stiffened and came to a stop. He wouldn't have understood this was because of the devil wires cast out by Setsura's right hand.

The man was in his early forties. From his disheveled long hair and beard, gray face covered in grime and ragged clothing revealing a rib showing through his papery skin, he seemed little more than a vagrant. Only his eyes glowed with a ghastly light.

This was clearly a man possessed.

“Renfield, eh,” Setsura remarked, coming to his feet. He meant the character in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, an inmate at the lunatic asylum attended to by Dr. John Seward. During the day, when the vampire was confined to his casket, Renfield watched over his casket and kept the vampire hunters at bay—when not snatching young girls at his master's command.

The Renfields of Shinjuku were the hit men who worked for the movers and shakers behind the scenes. Though in the movies that came later, the Renfield of the novel was more often depicted as a slave from the start to *Dracula's* intention rather than a mentally ill individual who fell under his influence.

“So tell me, where is this master of yours?”

In response to Setsura's question, the man only bared his teeth and growled. The reaction of a wild beast devoid of reason. Setsura moved his right hand ever so slightly. The man reared back and roared like a wounded lion as the pain radiated from the marrow of his bones and

shook his whole frame.

Setsura furrowed his brows. “The light in your eyes—you’ve lost your command of language as well. Sweet dreams, then.”

Those words had barely disturbed the air when the man crumpled to the floor with an inarticulate grunt.

Drawing the invisible, sub-micron titanium threads back inside his hand, Setsura looked down at the man and pinched the bridge of his nose. The man had on the tattered remains of a white T-shirt and camo trousers. His weapon was a SDF-issue Model 85 assault rifle.

They’d been expecting him, and there were bound to be more on the way. Setsura set off again, his footsteps detectably heavier than before.

Chapter 2

Her back pressed against the wall, Azusa was getting assaulted standing up. She didn't feel the coolness of the surface. Slender jabs of pain interrupted that solace.

Hemp ropes crisscrossed her bountiful upper torso, her breast jutting out from among the fluffy frayed strands—an unbearably arousing posture.

Her right leg raised, Hyota had his face buried between her thighs, lapping at her like a dog at a bowl of water. The disgust on Azusa's face was colored by naked arousal.

It'd been going on for ten minutes now. Her loins were sloppy with saliva and cum. Whatever she secreted Hyota sucked up, and never seemed to tire of the effort.

Her folds belonged to him. Licking her slit, teasing her bud and thrusting deeper. It simply didn't end. Penetrating her with his thick tongue, twisting and writhing with a stubborn unyielding tenacity, as if spelunking his way through the soft flesh.

When it came to a woman's sex, Hyota's hunger knew no depths. The sounds were already spilling from her lips. The pleasure filling her brimming body was sharp as a knife, impossible to hold in.

"Does that feel good?"

"It feels fine."

He asked the question over and over. *Feel good?* Followed by *Feels fine*. She wasn't lying. Didn't matter what man the tongue belonged to, the ripe fruit responded.

Hyota was into ropes as well. "Turn around," he commanded her.

Azusa did as she was told. Pressed her cheek against the concrete pillar, thrust out her ass. Hyota grabbed her ass. His fingers dug into her buttocks and got straight down to business, screwing his tongue into her ass, shaking his head back and forth as he attempted to burrow in.

His sheer dogged pursuit, as much as the stimulation, got Azusa hot and bothered. She tried keeping it in, but her vocal cords moved without her consent. This was a girl who knew no taboos.

Her body trembled. Her hips moved of their own accord. Entwined in the ropes, standing up while he was going down on her, her mind melted into a hot puddle.

She'd already been run ragged any number of times. First by the evil

brood in the basement of the Tohan Corporation ruins. Then, after bringing her here, Hyota had gone to her again like he'd been storing it up for years.

From the back—doggy style—from the front—missionary position—polling her on her preferences each time. Hyota was thoroughly versed in the erotic arts, devouring her body in an insatiable frenzy. She couldn't help but respond. And each time he moved on to an even more delicate part of her physique.

Ropes, her ass, hoisting her senses to ever greater heights, the sadistic assaults wrenching free every masochistic tendency lurking inside of her.

"Even untied, you will not flee," Hyota said, finally giving her backside a rest. The words came out in a groan. He was getting himself off as well. He said, while licking her again, "You will never forget the taste of me. Nor I you. Yours is a body seldom seen in this city of sin. I won't let go of it so easily."

"Don't let me go," Azusa moaned. "Give it to me more, *more*." Half her intent was to arouse him all the more. Half came from the core of her being. "Unleash me and I will heel. I'd never forsake someone like you. The kids around here are rank amateurs by comparison. Tie me tighter. Fuck me harder. Take away my freedom. Heap humiliation on me. It feels so much better that way."

"I'll lick you all over."

"Do it, dammit."

Hyota buried his ugly face between her peach-white cheeks.

At that moment, from somewhere else, a groan shook the air. Azusa glanced backwards. Hyota spun around and dashed off toward the back of the hallway. Azusa followed him. Hyota departed in such haste that he forgot all about her.

They came to a spacious area filled with wan light. Here Gento Roran had his sleeping chambers.

At some point, Hyota had picked up a flask. The sound grew louder. This wasn't the voice wrenched out by ordinary pain. These were the torments of hell.

Gento was lying naked at the foot of a six-foot-high dirt mountain.

"Gento-sama!" Hyota cried out with heartrending sorrow. He wrapped his arms around Gento and rocked him back and forth. Gento didn't awaken, his face still twisted in agony.

Hyota abandoned the effort, popped open the top off the flask and pressed the opening to his master's mouth. A thin stream of liquid spilled from the corners of his lips. He clearly wasn't swallowing, but Hyota persisted.

Seconds later, the stream had drained to a trickle. His Adam's apple finally moved.

"You drank it," Hyota said, the tension oozing out of his frame. "You

should be okay, then.”

“W-what’s that?”

Recognizing Azusa’s voice above him, Hyota’s eyes flashed warily. He hadn’t noticed her approaching. “Holy water,” he said proudly. “It softens the pain.” He glanced up at Azusa. “You didn’t leave?”

“Eh, whatever. Didn’t have a reason to run. I’m not dead yet. And I have to admit, I’m curious about what you’re brewing up here. Besides —” Azusa licked her lips. “You get it, right?”

Hyota gave the rope-bound body of the voluptuous woman a long glance. Without comment, he returned his attention to Gento. This same gremlin of a man had dodged Setsura Aki’s devil wires two, three times.

Those perverse pleasures fading from her body, Azusa looked down with great interest at Gento’s pained countenance. Hyota’s holy water worked its wonders. The strain slowly left Gento’s face. His features softened. He twitched several times, then opened his eyes.

Hyota relaxed considerably. He reverently laid the young master against the slope of earth.

Gento’s lips moved. “That you, Hyota?”

“Yes.”

“I must have collapsed.”

“Yes.”

A moment of silence followed, a silence containing two sets of expectations.

“I dreamed a dream,” he blurted out, as if trapped somewhere within this beautiful *jinn* a strange clump of cells had voiced their will. Strangely *human* words.

“Two of them. Do you understand what manner of dreams were these?”

“I can well imagine.”

“How are you faring?”

Realizing that the question was directed at her, Azusa took a step back, cognizant of her improper appearance, her sense of propriety finally rising to the fore. She turned around, more a reflex. Though her buttocks were no less full and sensuous than her bound breasts.

Gento continued, “My father appeared in the first. He pointed at me and told me *I had changed*. I comprehended his meaning soon enough. I comprehend it now. I am not the man I once was.”

Hyota silently bowed his head, a sign of agreement or respect. “You took your rest in a fine house.”

“Exactly,” Gento said in a far cooler voice. Then he said, still lying down, “Hyota, let’s try working up a sweat.”

In reaction to what could be taken as an eerie order, Hyota bowed and backed away.

“Out of the way,” Gento said to Azusa, and this otherwise headstrong girl retreated at once, as if pushed to the side by cold unseeing fingers.

"This okay?"

"There is no need for you to concern yourself so," Hyota answered in a muddled voice.

Not only his forehead, but the Inverness topcoat—of a sort once favored by Sherlock Holmes—shone with that dull wet glow. Azusa stared harder. She saw the glistening threads twine around his frame, gone in the blink of an eye.

An aura—fey and demonic—welled up between master and servant. For a moment, Azusa felt like she was observing combat among mortal enemies. She trembled.

"How do your skills fare?" asked Hyota.

"I have a ways to go," said Gento, a cool-headed scientist evaluating the results of an experiment. "Compared to Setsura?"

"I cannot say."

Gento's eyes flashed. "Don't play the fool with me."

"I would say that the one is the mirror of the other."

"In that case," Gento said, a touch of humor in his voice, "everything depends on the degree of our abstention and dedication henceforth. *He* must be training himself vigorously in order to defeat you. While I watch and wait. Is that what it comes down to?"

"It is all as your father wished."

"So there was value in hibernating for fifteen years after all."

"There most likely was."

"This calls for a celebration. Have you ascertained yet where Setsura lives?"

"I am still searching. However, a representative from the Shinjuku Restoration Society says they know his whereabouts."

The organization Hyota referred to worked for the producers of the Assassin Games that Setsura and Gento had made such a mess of. The power and influence of Hyota and Gento reached even into their secretive group.

"And what did he have to say for himself?" Gento asked with genuine curiosity.

"They sent three men after him. No news yet. I had planned on telling you as soon as you awoke."

That Hyota had not sallied forth was likely due to his thorough knowledge of Setsura's true strengths.

"They think three dogs can defeat a tiger?" Gento spat out. "Fools. Unlikely that he'll even be there. Can you employ the same means as this Restoration Society to find out where he is?"

"Probably."

"Something to get to later. In my current state, there is no need to rush. This body does not understand the workings of a simultaneous attack. By the way, where is the doctor?"

"Right here."

The answer came as if he'd been waiting there all along. With an understandable start, Gento glanced behind him. Hyota let out a little gasp. The doctor was standing in his white cape atop the mound of earth.

"We met in the infirmary of the Coliseum, but I do not believe we've been formally introduced. I am Mephisto."

"Gento Roran," Gento replied with a polite nod.

Gento was naked. A woman bound with ropes plus his dark and feral servant made for a most unusual reception party. But what had the good doctor been up to since Hyota brought him to this underground cavern?

With no further explanation, Mephisto descended the earthen mountain. "What a strange mound of dirt," he said, bobbing his chin at the curious silhouette behind him.

Except that Gento had strung his devil wires around his resting place, high and low, such that no other living thing should've been able to climb it.

"It is permeated with the thoughts and memories of one particular person. It's been a long time since I have witnessed such an energetic life force. Your father, I take it?"

Even Gento was impressed by this deduction. "How did you know?"

"I have looked into the feud between the Aki and Roran clans on my own, though I have yet to discern the reason behind the conflict. I cannot imagine another pair of pedigrees with a history as barren as yours."

"I would rather you take that as a point of pride," Gento corrected him. "The blood that flows through our veins shall rule the world. Perhaps that is no less true of the Aki clan. More importantly, you are close friends with Setsura Aki. Did he not bring you a most peculiar patient?"

"He did indeed. She is presently in my hospital."

"I don't suppose I could ask you to turn her over?"

"Not unless you wish to make enemies of us both."

"That would be problematic," Gento said with a slight smile. "Besides, bringing her here would do neither of us any good. Best she stay where she is. Or—"

"Or?"

"Seek out another doctor perhaps? Surely not one up to your standards, but an equally *adventurous* chap nonetheless."

"Do whatever strikes your fancy. Is that the only reason you summoned me here?"

"An examination is all that remains."

Mephisto nodded. "I saw for myself your amazing dead man."

"I had hoped for such a reply. The dead can be made to walk."

"Meeting their mutual demise in the Coliseum and gone to meet his maker, he finds himself a soulless slave? The darkness of Hades while

awaiting reincarnation must be filled with such an accursed darkness.”

Gento looked past Mephisto, to something lurking there in one corner of the gloom-laden expanse. And then directed those ironic eyes back at Mephisto.



"Are you aware how I intend to use it?" he asked.

"A gladiator to send against Setsura. Fascinating."

"I appreciate your cutting to the chase. Can you make it so?"

“Yes, but there will be conditions.”

“No need to even mention such things. I won’t put a word in edgewise. Do whatever you feel is right and proper. Anything you need, Hyota will provide. My only demand is that you bring to the fore in *him* every last ounce of *their* abilities.”

“Are you sure that is wise? Perhaps it will attack you when I am done. Or I will reveal its weaknesses to Setsura.”

Gento grinned. An enchanting smile that would make one of Odysseus’s sirens his prisoner instead. “As long as you are the man known as Doctor Mephisto, I am sure neither will be in the cards.”

Mephisto’s mouth parted in a thin smile. “I see you would make an ideal employer, but my conditions are somewhat different. First of all, my surgical fees are dear. And I do not take money in kind.”

“How fortunate, for I have no money.”

“Second, I must ascertain for myself whether you are deserving of the name Gento Roran. However, this as well falls under the purview of my qualifying evaluation.”

“I happily accept both. As for your fee, whatever your heart desires.”

Gento looked directly at Mephisto. Observing the mask of carnality that briefly shadowed his face, Azusa furrowed her brows.

“As for my qualifications, those are—”

Mephisto’s raised right hand cut him off. A tense silence fell, the meaning of which escaped the other two there, until from far away there came the sound of creaking steel.

Chapter 3

The sound of something massive moving across steel plates. The footsteps approached, unimaginably heavy with physical weight and foreboding. Painful to hear—the long gap between each thudding step. And yet if the direction was true, it would arrive here inevitably.

By the time the human figure appeared from the depth of the shadows, Azusa was not as startled as she thought she would be.

A huge naked man ten feet tall. People that big were equally rare in Shinjuku, though their presence was hardly news to anybody. Not to mention that right before him was Gento, and he didn't have a stitch on him.

He stepped into the dim slash of light slanting in from some unknown quarter.

The squawk of surprise squeezed out of Azusa's throat was due to the small and wildly disproportional head perched on the giant's shoulders.

He and Gento had gone their separate ways the first time they met. But not the second. This was Siegfried from the Coliseum, bearing Yamada's head.

As he walked toward them, as if wading out of a black surf, that alone was not enough to provoke a reaction from Azusa.

The head was facing backwards. And what she could not have known—that the wound left by Setsura's devil wires was knit together with an exceedingly fine thread.

"Human beings have made no headway when it comes to resurrecting the dead. That ability has changed not at all from ancient times. For the human to become more than human, those suitable and necessary measures first have to be taken."

As if that included putting the head on backwards.

"To be honest, I have a hard time believing it myself," Gento said, shaking his head. "Hardly thirty minutes have passed since I asked you to do a diagnosis, and you have already unraveled the art of necrodancing. Surgical tools could hardly be sufficient to pull off an operation like this."

"Neither time nor fine materials are required," Mephisto answered coolly. "Only the doctor and the patient." Not a speck of pride or humility colored his voice. It was the same whether reporting news of a patient saved or a patient lost. Nothing less would be expected from the

Demon Physician.

"And this test of yours?" Gento asked.

That was the signal. The giant jumped. Bounded, in fact. Propelling all five hundred pounds of his weight with a dexterity that approached that of a tumbling gymnast, he launched himself at Gento. The soles of his feet parting the air, the naked body soared over him.

Tucking into a crouch in the moment before he landed, Gento vaulted over his head, the head pointing oddly in the wrong direction. The invisible devil wires spilled out from his right hand. Gento saw them reflected in Yamada's upturned eyes.

A surge of air buffeted him from both sides. The giant clapped his hands at an unimaginable speed around his flying frame. With unsparing herculean strength, those hands squeezed around the lithe body.

Gento's countenance contorted, air *whooshed* out of his mouth. The speed of action here far exceeded that at the Coliseum.

But—then a red line circumscribed the right wrist. As the hand fell to the earth with a soft thud, Gento flew free. Kicking against the stump as it again reached up to grab him, pitching backwards and angling away.

He shook his head from side to side. At that moment, the titanium threads streaked down at the giant's neck, too fine and fast for anyone to see. Gento spit them out of his mouth, bit down on the ends, and jerked on the wire lasso.

The giant sank down. The devil wires flashed fruitlessly over his head. For the first time, Gento's expression took on an unsteady look.

The giant ran towards where Gento was going to land. With a split second to go, he didn't have time to shake loose a new devil wire, and the giant's speed put him a half-second away.

Throwing his shoulder forward with a force that could bust through a concrete wall, the giant's inertia carried him a dozen feet beyond his intended target. His bare feet skidded to a ferocious halt, like sandpaper against stone. Blue smoke rose up from the flesh.

Yamada's head looking back at where he'd been.

By the time he realized that Gento was floating there in midair, his stitched-together sections opened wide and came apart. Parting in two, his upper half slid off his lower half and fell to the ground like an installation of abstract sculpture.

"Splendid!" Mephisto said, though there was no telling from his tone of voice how heartfelt the praise really was.

Releasing the wire from a shard in the shattered ceiling, Gento set down on the ground. He pressed his right hand against his side.

"Hollow praise, to be sure. I cracked two ribs in the process."

Mephisto had nothing to say about that. "If Hyota's opinion of your condition is correct, then Setsura would have fared no better."

"Installing radar detection in Yamada's head, increasing the muscular reflexes and speed of nerve impulses fivefold—all this with a simple

twist of the head. I have underestimated you, Doctor.”

“Most everybody does.”

“I expect you to outdo yourself next time,” Gento said emphatically.

Mephisto responded with a playful smile, the smile of a mischievous child, of a warlock who could turn the dead into supermen.

Gento’s voice grew brighter. “But I have a different end in mind.”

“If it has to do with that girl, then I decline.”

“This is completely separate.”

“Then I will perform the procedure at once.”

“I am deeply grateful.”

“In any case, what about her?”

“Apparently an acquaintance of Setsura. Slipped out of our net and back into it again. If it would prove useful, please help yourself to her heart, her brains, any other part that might come in handy.”

To this ghastly proposition, Mephisto answered, “All in good time.”

With this eerie reply hanging in the air, he walked over to the giant. After three steps he turned around, as if recalling something to mind.

“I would like to see this *educational* machine of yours.”

“Unfortunately, it has gone missing since dawn,” said Hyota.

“Has it fallen into Setsura’s hands?” Gento asked.

“That is yet to be determined. The concern right now is that the hearse did not take the appointed route. The road took it near Kawadacho.”

“Fuji TV, you mean.”

“That is correct. I took a quick look, but depending on the point of view, it might be considered the safest place for it.”

“Because of the watchman guarding it,” said Mephisto.

Except that no one there knew that was where Setsura was headed. What kind of reaction it would arouse if they did was another question entirely, but not one Mephisto was interested in raising right then.

“A hallowed principle of medicine is to avoid abusing the doctor-patient confidentialities and extracting information from third parties irrelevant to the diagnosis, but if you would permit me one question—”

“Go ahead,” Gento said breezily.

“Of the two dreams you mentioned earlier, what was the substance of the other?”

“Does it concern you?”

“Well, it is a dream dreamed by Gento Roran.”

“I dreamed of Setsura.”

“Hoh.”

“At some future date, I am sure we can find the time to fill you in on all the details. But not now. Let’s first straighten up all the loose ends before us.”

“Fine,” Mephisto quickly agreed.

Gento directed his attention to the two others standing there. “Hyota,

have you enjoyed yourself with that woman?"

"Yes," Hyota said, nodding. Azusa felt herself blushing a bit despite herself.

"I suppose you should be on your way. See to the retrieval of my abode."

"As you wish."

His arm locked around Azusa, Hyota disappeared into the gloomy darkness.

"Well, then. The fee for your medical expertise."

Gento stood and climbed up the mountain. However he made his way, he did not leave a single dent or divot behind in the smooth surface. The summit of this small mountain was shaped like the top of a cone sliced off. Mephisto watched with curious eyes as the young man lay face down.

"Whatever strikes your fancy," Gento said with a coquettish lilt.

Without another word, Mephisto knelt down next to him.

Part 6: The Master

Chapter 1

Two variables in the local environment of the television studio changed as Setsura made his way further in.

He wiped the sweat off his brow. The humidity was definitely climbing.

Though the heat of early summer often climbed north of ninety degrees, the rain hadn't stopped falling since morning and the temperature outside was a good ten degrees cooler.

Regardless of how locked and off-limits these back rooms once were, the studio had gotten a direct hit from the Devil Quake. The floors and ceilings were lined with cracks. Not a single pane of glass was left intact.

Add to that the strange smell. One whiff awakened the primordial mind to its nature. *Oh, that.* Go to the zoo, and this was the odor always wafting up from the pen of one creature in particular. The odor of the "watchman," as Mephisto had put it only a few minutes before (and several miles away).

Setsura came to a sudden halt in front of the elevators.

There were two doors on his right, both closed. Setsura froze like an ice sculpture. Slowly, inexorably, the aura around him changed—from *me* to *I*. From human to genie.

Without sitting down and doing a face-to-face, a close friend couldn't have detected the transfiguration.

Perhaps the enemy was close. Perhaps an enemy he could perceive. In front of him and to his left were dreary, dusty hallways. Nothing more. But somebody saw something. Someone was watching. *Something* was watching. From *somewhere*—

Watching Setsura.

The narrow corridor branched off in a T. A demonic vibe from an unidentifiable corner began to collect around him. Suffused with poisons, the radiating thoughts and evil intents turned the very molecules in the air toxic.

Secret religious sects in the city were known to be capable of the same, but the source of these vapors was not human.

Setsura just stood there.

A normal human being would have gone mad and dropped dead on the spot. The swirl of noxious fumes suddenly wavered. The vibe Setsura was projecting had pushed aside the film of poison or rather, thinned it

out. The genie's *qi* had denatured and devoured its essence.

In a flash, the air returned to normal.

At the same time, the tension eased out of Setsura's body. The enemy was no longer there. Those nowhere eyes on the back of his neck vanished into the distance.

Setsura glanced at the elevator doors and uncurled the fingers of his right hand. "No time to use that," he murmured, lightly shaking his wrist.

There was nothing there, nothing that the eyes could see.

Setsura still didn't move. As when *he* became *him*, not a drop of sweat marred his brow. His eyes half-closed, like a young philosopher ruminating about the mysteries of the universe on a listless rainy afternoon.

His lips moved. "Soundstage 13, is it?" Each word like pearls strung on a string. "There is no telling who made it was it is, but that is the direction of doom, the demon gate. There is where the Master of this place chose."

He started off at a casual stroll, the silent death struggle unfolding around him vanquished from his mind. The expression on his comely face as unruffled as ever, he strolled into this den of thieves, into the depths of Fuji TV.

The menace to Shinjuku that Fuji TV had become, this citadel of terror—to call it a haunted house sounded rather antiquated, but there in Kawadacho the word fit. Numerous strange phenomena had been observed on the grounds of Fuji TV and in the surrounding areas.

People going missing was an everyday occurrence in this city, but when a family of five vanished, and all of them in a single week, the commando police swung into action. Witnesses reported seeing a family passing through the front gate of the television studio. Five elite members of the mobile police were sent in after them, armed to the teeth.

Nobody ever came back out again.

The disappearances began five years after the Devil Quake, reaching their peak at the seven-year mark, and continuing today. The outbreaks typically came to a head in July or August and then sharply declined, reaching zero between December and February. And then the pattern repeated all over again.

This vanishing phenomenon didn't only affect the people living there, but even passing taxi drivers. Confirmation came after the first documented disappearance in the 1990s, in what came to be known as the "Absconding Taxi Incident."

The cabbies had last called into the dispatcher while taking East Gaien Street from Yotsuya to Waseda Tsurumaki. A total of ten taxis

were discovered neatly parked in front of the television studio lobby. Further complicating things, all the routes to Fuji TV had been cordoned off by the police. There was no damage to any of the barricades.

The obvious questions were why the taxis had headed to Fuji TV, and how they had gotten past the perimeter fences. And why none of the cabbies were ever seen again. There wasn't a drop of blood on the abandoned cars or signs of a struggle.

Two weeks later, an investigation team was sent inside. Not local law enforcement, they were relieved to know, but a platoon of SDF rangers.

Only one came out again.

The lone surviving ranger burst into a bakery on the Kawadacho shopping street in a half-crazed state. The SDF was summoned and sent in a rescue team. For the next month, the residents of Kawadacho twice heard screams and gunshots echoing from the Fuji TV studios.

After that, the rumors flew fast and thick—about the SDF stringing high-tension electric fences around the place, about teams armed with flame throwers mounting repeated assaults, and even about plans to hire demolition experts to blow up the building. But whatever they did amounted to nothing. The status quo continued unchanged till now.

Even in the light of a midday sun, the dark castle cast ominous shadows across the ground, standing there as one more symbol of the Demon in Demon City.

Setsura came to the central courtyard. The rain continued to fall, though now more a drizzle. A number of *things* were moving around inside the ruined remains of the building. The dragging of feet, the drawing of ragged breaths, and all ruled by one overriding will—

That was sending them at Setsura. They came down the hallways, descended the stairs, bearing those vile vibes with them.

He sensed everything through the fingers on his right hand.

Setsura looked around. The rainy haze cloaked the heaps of bricks and debris, but couldn't mask the stench. Puddles formed here and there, smoldering like sulfurous hot springs, throwing off an acrid miasma.

That demonic spirit still held sway in the open air, for the air sweltered with the same heat and humidity as inside the building. Add to that the smell of sulfur, and the atmosphere became a lung-choking witch's brew. Even the clouds above seemed to shrink away.

Setsura brushed a strand of hair away from his damp forehead. It was hard to tell the difference between drops of sweat and rain. He pointed his finger at the cedar tree. Thanks to its sturdy roots and trunk, it alone remained standing as it once stood.

The tree was over thirty feet high and would take the embrace of three grown men to span its circumference. The branches stretched wide

and reached out, casting faint shadows on the ground.

Holding that pose, Setsura leapt into the branches of the tree. Plunging into the sheltering darkness within the indecipherable yellow and green leaves, the rich foliage wavered for a moment before springing back to its original position.

A few seconds later, several people emerged from the studio doors and from behind the piles of debris. They came in various types and sizes, but all with the same disheveled appearance.

Two rangers in military fatigues. A young man, bare legs poking out from a T-shirt. A young woman in a blouse and skirt. A middle-aged woman with heavy breasts that swayed as she walked.

Five altogether. Their faces and clothing were dirty and stained. The one thing they did have in common was that, one way or another, all of them were armed. The SDF rangers carried Model 89 SIG P220 assault rifles. The young man had a steel pipe in his hands. The young woman wielded a foot-long carving knife.

The assault rifles were set on auto, the men holding them in possession of their senses and their mission. The countenances of the rest were equally suffused with vitality. Theirs were not the vacant eyes betraying psychological compulsion exerted from without. Every step, every movement was sure and swift.

Setsura lay on a branch and didn't budge.

The motley bunch gazed around the courtyard and exchanged puzzle looks. "Nothing here," said the young woman, smacking the blade against the palm of her hand. Perhaps she had always been an irritable sort, and now had no reason to hide it. A stream of blood trickled between her fingers and mixed with the rain before staining the ground.

"No, the Master is never wrong," said one of the rangers, gesturing with the muzzle of the Model 89. "Keep searching."

"Okey dokey," said the teenager in the T-shirt.

They fanned out—nobody leading them—apparently of their own volition. No two of them moved in the same direction. This was the ideal military squad on maneuvers. Unlike the man in the PR department, they could communicate.

This must be a special unit.

One of the SDF rangers approached the tree and cast his suspicious gaze up. Then walked on. It took them ten minutes to make a complete circuit of the courtyard. They gathered back where they'd started.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," said one of the rangers.

"Looks normal to me," said the middle-aged woman.

"We're going to catch hell for this," the young woman said in a frightened voice.

"There is no returning with our honor besmirched," said the second ranger, with bitter resolution. "*This* is the only reason our lives are worth living."

The rest of their rain-washed faces brimmed with equally wrenching distress.

“There’s only one place left,” said the ranger, the same one who’d previously checked the tree.

He took a step away from the group and raised the Model 89 to his shoulder. The muzzle spat orange flame. The 7.62 mm rounds tore white gashes in the thick, leather-like bark and turned the sickly yellow leaves into confetti. The hot spent brass raised puffs of white steam as they fell through the rain to the earth.

The thick limb Setsura was lying on shuddered and shook. Hot lead buzzed by his ears. It was like the rain had turned into a shower of incandescent cinders. But his countenance did not contort in the slightest. Facing a painful death, his features would doubtlessly remain as impassive as ever.

The SDF ranger unleashed fifteen rounds and released the trigger. “All we can do now is deliver an honest report.”

Raw fear and resignation showed on their faces. Without another word, they turned back the way they came. The rain drummed down as they vanished into the mist.

A spider inched down a slender line of silk from the tree limb above and alit on the ground. Though this spider stood erect on two legs and wore a black slicker. The hems of the slicker fluttered and snapped as he cut across the courtyard to the building beyond, raising his left hand above his head.

The handle of the whirling carving knife came to a curious halt in midair. At the same time, from the same direction came a groan—the silhouette of the person who’d thrown it writhed—her hand pressed to her neck.

Setsura slowly turned around. The remaining four came at him through the driving rain. At the fore was the middle-aged woman, a pair of scissors in one hand. Behind her was the teenage boy and the SDF rangers. No matter how well Setsura had hid his presence from them, the Master had still taken notice.

Their faces were suffused with joy. The woman charged at him, the scissors held aloft like a rampaging psycho killer.

Her wide eyes grew wider at the sight of the carving knife protruding from between her heaving breasts. At first, the sight seemed to puzzle her. More than half of the carving knife jutted out her back. Gushing blood, she toppled over.

The teenager—he was maybe nineteen—jumped at him, swinging the pipe at his head too fast to dodge out of the way. It connected with a dull thud.

Though this was not the sound of steel striking a skull. The pipe sunk instead into the shoulder of the now-ashen woman. Setsura had hauled her to her feet before the teenager could react. The teenager slammed

against her back. The blade of the carving knife plunged into his heart.

Leaving them skewered together, Setsura leapt backwards. Seeing that he had no cover, the SDF rangers smirked. The two muzzles spat out a fiery hail of bullets at seven hundred rounds a minute.

Flesh flew like popped balloons. The rain ran red—with the blood of the lady and the teenager. The two corpses had absorbed the twin volleys.

Either due to the impact of the bullets, or manipulated by an outside force, they spun around to face the two men.

The ranger on the right gurgled as the carving knife unleashed by the centrifugal force of rotation embedded itself in his neck. Pressing his left hand against the wound, firing the Model 89 with his right, the ranger keeled over.

His abrupt demise interrupted his partner's attack. Setsura swung in an arc to the left, moving so fast through the dark silver torrents pouring down that his figure blurred like a smear of India ink.

The surviving ranger aimed his gun. The muzzle roared—just as his partner popped up in front of him like a dancing marionette. The marionette tried to level his gun and was torn to pieces like a rag doll.

The ranger must have been an expert at close-quarters combat, for as his partner bobbed back up again, instead of making the same mistake twice he beat a fast retreat, ducking behind the cedar tree just as a flash of silver light pierced the trunk.



Barely maintaining a human form, the gunned-down ranger had grabbed the knife out of his throat and hurled it at him. The dead man's strength so exceeded that of the living that the blade sank halfway

through the sturdy wood.

"It's been a while since I've played with knives," Setsura mused. "I'm a little slow on the draw."

He waved his right hand, spun on his heels, and set off in the direction where that pained moan had first come from. The report of a gun didn't echo from the cover of the cedar. The moan came from a gray figure, her hands fastened around her neck, cloaked in the haze of rain.

The girl who'd thrown the knife at him.

Her white blouse clung to her skin, throwing the lines of her pubescent body into strong relief. She was wearing a jeans skirt. Setsura gazed at her young pained face. Her neck and shoulders were grimy, but her face was smooth and comely, the result of some care and grooming.

There had to be a few makeup rooms in a television studio.

"Sorry *I* took so long with the knife," Setsura said impassively. He might as well have been a beautiful computerized answering machine. "Those who bare their fangs to *me* rarely live long, but you have suffered enough. Besides, a guide may well come in handy. Or would the one of you be better off as two?"

Grasping the grave implications of the question, the girl shook her head. Quite unaware, she'd gained the latitude to move her head that much.

Every last trace of the pain that promised to literally split her in two vanished. The girl gazed dumbfounded up at Setsura. More than the fear and loathing, surprise and desire colored her eyes. From the moment she set eyes on him, the pain vanished from around her throat.

He pointed at a spot on the ground a few yards off, though her eyes remained glued to his face. "Stamp your feet there. The cedar tree will feel the reverberations most keenly."

She finally turned her attention to the place Setsura had indicated and clumsily moved over to it. Staring at the cedar, she softly raised her sandaled right foot and brought it down.

The shape of the tree abruptly shifted. At three feet above the ground the trunk slid apart, the upper part listing to her left. The girl looked on with wide eyes. Something had sliced through the tree.

Stranger still, the canopy of the tree, its branches reaching out, didn't fall over. The trunk slid sideways at an angle, as if down an icy ramp, and dropped vertically, embedding itself into the wet ground.

A second later, from the other side of the stump a mist of blood filled the air. The girl well knew whose from the torso that tumbled onto the ground.

"Shall we go?" Setsura said, and turned around.

The girl cast her moist eyes after him and hurried to catch up. The two set off together.

"Where is the Master?"

"I don't know."

“We first need to dry off. Where would be best?”

“I’ll show you.”

The odd conversation between these two foes faded away and they passed back through the exit doors. Then, only the sound of the rain disturbed the silence of the dead, showing no regard for their souls.

Chapter 2

The world was wrapped in light and dark. Where they overlapped shades of gray arose. Responding to currents of air that would not disturb a chick's down, the layers of dark swirled and twined. The light shattered into a kaleidoscope of colors.

Here was an everlasting twilight zone filled with two sounds, the far distant fall of the rain and the closer hum of electricity and electronics.

Behind the silhouette of a man hard at work, another figure approached. Next to him was a large shadow.

"How is it faring?" Gento Roran asked. He was wearing an Inverness topcoat like Hyota's.

"If perfection is what you are after—" said Mephisto.

"Yes."

"Well, then. It couldn't be worse. Shall we take a look?"

"By all means."

Mephisto took several steps back, and switched on what appeared to be a generator. A grating mechanical sound was followed by the flashing of lights here and there in the dim surroundings. Near and far, far and near, with no sense of depth and distance. Perhaps nothing more than phantoms and will-o'-the-wisps.

Lying on the operating table, the giant rose up. He was human. He was in the shape of a human being. Except his upper half exceeded five feet. There were always conditions attached. Here especially. Demon City Shinjuku in particular. And without question when it came to this synthetic person.

The giant Siegfried bore the head of Yamada, wielder of the Dimensional Blade. The head had died once, and now came back to life on the shoulders of the man already killed once.

Blessed with a splendid physique from the start, the body of the giant boasted a remarkable symmetry. The small head aside, he projected a beauty that almost exceeded the sense of menace.

"And all in an hour. Your skills outdo even the rumors," Gento remarked, observing that not a scar marred the neck. "Do the dead rejoice or live on in eternal sorrow?"

It wasn't clear whether he was praising the brief amount of time required to bring this resurrection, or the exquisite nature of the surgical work.

The two turned their attention to the head. Yamada's slender eyes were shut. "Time to wake up," Mephisto cooed. "Your master has arrived. You should say hello."

Yamada's eyelids fluttered, the brain still arousing itself from its slumber. At last they opened. Siegfried slowly lowered his huge frame from the operating table.

That movement alone kicked up a breeze that stirred Mephisto's and Gento's hair. Considering the fighting abilities he'd had to start with, how much more intimidating he must be now.

Even Gento, who boasted being every bit Setsura's equal, had only recently tossed his hat into the death ring, as was evident from the pale limbs poking out from the topcoat wrapped in white bandages. He'd broken a few ribs during their last face off.

Yamada's head angled down. More faltering than a child remembering his manners, the cruel lips quivered. "Pleased—to—meet—you—"

Mephisto's eyes gleamed. "Your master killed you. Revenge yourself."

The provocation was unmistakable. Gento didn't move, deporting himself as a master. A clear sense of will stirred in the giant's turbid eyes, circulated like poison through his veins, swelling and expanding every cell in his body. In front of both Mephisto and Gento, the giant seemed to double in size before their eyes.

"You claim to be Setsura's equal. You have prevailed previously, but what about now? Wouldn't your death sing praises to my skills?"

Did Mephisto mean to kill Setsura himself?

Gento didn't answer. The giant stood erect. Once again—no, adding the battle in the Coliseum, the third time or fourth time—this pair was destined to fight. Gento had carried the day so far, but now Doctor Mephisto's demonic surgery had been added to the mix.

A spectator to this grotesque combat, the doctor's eyes were as cool to its consequences as ever.

The giant's lips moved. "Master—"

"Yes," Mephisto whispered. "He is your master. And the man who killed you."

"Who—killed—me—"

"Yes. Revenge yourself."

"Revenge—"

"Strike now while you can."

The doctor's words flipped a switch in the giant's brain. He roared, the echoes of which practically shook apart the very molecules of the air. Here and there where only the darkness should rule, painful growls and cries arose, and then just as quickly stilled.

The disturbed atmosphere struck the cheeks of Gento and Mephisto and left behind white vapor trails. The giant's vocalization had changed even the composition of the air.

“Master,” Master muttered, and jumped forward, a perfect physical form that might contend even with Michelangelo’s David. Not an single abnormality marred its outward appearance.

Beneath him, Gento flowed like water. The giant’s right hand carved out an arc like the pendulum of a huge grandfather clock, the scooping fingers brushing Gento’s hair.

In a flash, the two switched positions. They faced each other, Gento next to the operating table, the giant standing where he once stood. A strange aura enveloped them—the burning fire of joy.

“If this is the work you truly have wrought,” Gento said, “then we may yet defeat Setsura. But that is enough for now. Call off this contest.”

“You said it yourself. You are the master. If the servant does not hearken to your voice, then you can hardly deport yourself as such. Relax. Changes can still be made. Including you.”

Gento smiled. “In that case—” He sprinted at the giant before the sentence left his mouth.

The giant’s right foot swung in a roundhouse kick, its speed turning the leg into a blur, strong enough to crack a concrete pillar. The blow didn’t connect, but the giant stepped back faster than Gento advanced.

The stabbing *nukite* thrust aimed at his rippled abdomen fell several inches short. Gento missed the expected step and momentarily faltered. With a dozen feet now stretching out between them, he prepared to cast out his devil wires.

The hands of the giant hanging by his side looked peculiarly shapely and slender. Yamada’s hands!

Brimming with confidence, they rushed at Gento’s head. Residing in real time and space, while moving through a void of its own making, this was a martial wizardry that could slice through titanium steel, the Dimensional Blade.

With no place to turn, the crisscrossing motion tore vertically and horizontally at Gento Roran’s body. A moment later, a black line bisected Yamada’s smiling face from his forehead to his chin.

The giant raised his hands and squashed the wound closed as it burst apart at the seams. Clearly nursing a literal splitting headache, the giant looked at Gento Roran and his eerie smile.

The topcoat fell into four pieces at his feet. He surely never saw it coming, but the clothing was rent apart not only down his front but across his back as well.

Nevertheless, he had just managed to dodge the fearsome Dimensional Blade, causing the giant to miss his target. That smile of satisfaction spoke to his quick footwork.

Due to the giant’s surprise and the severity of the wound, the dark red splotch widened, his face grew ashen. Gento grinned at him like a jovial angel of death.

“Drop your guard for a second and lose your life. But call it a day now and what would we have brought the good doctor all the way here for? Once more into the breach, shall we?”

The meaning of that *we* soon became apparent. A red cross stained the bandages covering Gento from his belly button to his chest, thickening by the second, already spreading out and seeping down.

The giant hadn't missed his mark after all.

Gento raised his hands and pressed them against his temples. “The terms here are the same,” he said. “Unless we hasten quickly to a conclusion, we will both go down together.”

“Master—” A voice dull-witted, ominous, and sad all at once.

The top of the giant's head opened wide. He reached out to the right and left, arms parallel with the floor. Sensing what was coming, Gento sank down lower to the ground.

As the giant turned, a red line welled up around his waist. Gento's devil wire. But instead of dismembering, it cast off blood like a water sprinkler as he spun like a top.

Devices within the arc of his spinning hands shattered. Flames erupted from the floor. The operating table split in two. Fresh lacerations marred everything the Dimension Blade touched, before cleaving in two.

Mephisto observed the gruesome sight without so much as the flicker of an eyebrow.

Gento danced on the wind, shooting out devil wires. Every last one of them cut apart by the raging Dimensional Blade, humming as the air rushed into the vacuum in its wake.

Gashes opened up on Gento's forehead and ankle. Blood showered into the air and sprinkled to the ground. But knowing the meaning of his own defeat, a small smile welled up.

The floor beneath his feet ripped apart. Cracks ran up the wall to the ceiling. Weaving among the intervals in the increasingly hectic attacks, Gento sprang up.

Casting out the devil wires from his right hand, he saw the key to victory within his grasp. The rapid rotation sparked strange changes in the giant's body. With the red at his waist marking the boundaries, his top half faced Gento while his bottom half turned toward the gloom behind him.

He swayed and fell like a tree, splitting in two and shaking the ground upon impact. Sparks showered down.

“Doctor!”

Forgetting to tend to his own deep wounds, Gento cast his eyes at the arc of the giant's left hand, in the shape of the Dimensional Blade and Mephisto right in front of him.

Mephisto cupped his left hand around his right shoulder. Gento ran up to him, reached out and touched his shoulder. It slid apart.

“Doctor—”

“It seems to have been severed. But no need to worry. Fixing it myself is much simpler than leaving it to others.”

“That is a relief.”

Mephisto returned the arm to its joint. He looked down at the giant with almost tired eyes. “You will live again, but I’ve given you all the power you can handle. No matter how much we have of anything, we’ll always want more.”

“I am still alive. It follows that Setsura would be too.”

Mephisto nodded. “How do you wish to proceed?”

“There is something I would like you to get for me.”

“What is it and where?”

A mechanical scream drowned out Mephisto’s words.

The girl directed her attention to the strange changes taking place in her body. Her white blouse clung to her wet body. Her slender frame carried large breasts and an ample butt. Her nipples showed through the fabric, though she made no effort to hide it, nor was she embarrassed by it.

Moments before, a shock shot through her nerves, like a cold needle stuck into her ass. As if flipping a switch, her entire body lit up from within as if a furnace had fired up in her chest. The symptoms were initially similar to those caused by alcohol or metabolic drinks, but by now far exceeded them.



She was burning up from within. White smoke enveloped her. She hadn't yet grasped that the sharp rise in body temperature had turned her damp blouse and skirt to steam. There was no way a human being should be able to survive something like that.

The human body could withstand an internal body temperature of a hundred and four degrees. The currents of heat swirling inside her easily exceeded a hundred and forty. And yet she lived.

Her blouse and skirt dried in a flash. The elevation of the temperature stopped and began to plummet. Though now cooled by equally feverish chills, the girl remained conscious.

"You're holding up well," a low voice observed. She turned around.



Standing across the narrow table from her was the man who'd seized her. She knew he was an enemy who must be vanquished, but found herself possessed by his cherubic beauty.

This was Setsura Aki.

They were in what must have been a production planning room, a dreary collection of four narrow tables, a blackboard, and chairs. This was where they'd gone to dry off, the place where the Master's senses couldn't reach.

She couldn't refuse him. His unearthly skills, to start with, had dispatched the rest of her party in a few seconds flat, and add to that the unearthly pain around her neck. But more than anything, his unearthly comeliness drew her along like a dog at the end of a leash.

Despite the demon lurking there beneath the surface, once entranced, man or woman alike, there was no straying from his will.

"Your clothes appear to have dried off. I'll be going."

The girl focused her bleary eyes on him. There wasn't a spot of water on his black-clad person.

"Did you stick that thing up your ass, too?"

"Of course," Setsura said, nodding his chin at the door. "Stay here until *I* return. Otherwise that pain in your neck from before will return."

"You're just going to leave me here?" she pouted.

"Yes."

"I know all the shortcuts around here. Aren't I supposed to be your hostage?"

“You are also a burden.”

“Then why did you spare me?”

“Perhaps you struck *his* fancy.”

“What does that mean?”

Setsura didn't answer, but headed for the door.

“Wait,” the girl called out. “There are a lot of my friends still running around out there. You'd be better off taking me with you.”

Setsura stopped. “Would these friends of yours be so forgiving to you?”

The girl fell silent.

“Everybody knows what matters to them most. Go home if you can.”

“No. The Master is here.”

Setsura turned to leave.

“Wait. My name is Kotomi. I don't remember my last name. What's yours?”

The door closed without an answer.

Left alone in the stuffy, cramped room, Kotomi stared blankly at the door.

Chapter 3

Studio 13 was located at the back of the building, in the very center of the grounds of Fuji TV.

The further in Setsura proceeded, the hotter and more humid it became. An odd odor permeated the surroundings as the air grew increasingly poisonous.

Setsura slipped past many of his foes on the way to the studio. Like the ones he'd encountered in the courtyard they included men wearing military fatigues, and men and women of all ages patrolling the halls, weapons in hand.

All were those who'd been enthralled. The survivors, at least.

Although their movements were easy to read, for whatever reason Setsura took himself to the midst of their living quarters. Strangely enough, as he drew closer to the studio, the place took on a more orderly appearance.

Serving trays were lined up on the tables in the company cafeteria. In the kitchen, brimming pots and pans simmered over a low heat, fifteen of them. The number of people under the Master's thrall. The Master must have a vested interest in keeping them alive.

There were beds in the sleeping quarters, and evidence of women's makeup being used. Even without seeing Kotomi for himself, it was clear they still maintained some sense of themselves as individuals. Far more than that, they were maintaining their sense of mission to protect the Master, and the forthright and exacting mental state the mission required, excluding the unethical and immoral behavior which inevitably resulted.

The influence of the Master invited a kind of emotional corruption that manifested itself in their ragged clothing and unkempt appearance. And yet the women still fussed with their looks, revealing a latitude in their mental processes that persisted beyond this "principal occupation" of theirs.

Two hours after leaving Kotomi, in a corner of the dimly-lit building where time seemed to lose track of itself, Setsura stopped in front of a soaring gray steel door. Stenciled on the door was the number 13.

A sign above the door glowed red. The illuminated white letters flashed, "On Air." The meaning was clear: the Master was in and the Master was watching.

Setsura shot a strand of devil wire inside. He didn't detect the Master there either. He'd cast thousands of threads around the building, recording the presence of every living thing, except the Master. There were places apparently where even his devil wires couldn't steal in.

Setsura put his hand on the door. Some of the Master's enraptured followers were within. Knowing that, he turned the knob. The door was locked, but there was a keyhole into which he could send his devil wires. His fingers moved with the dexterity of a brain surgeon.

His fingers could sense and command the movements of the threads up to a mile away, or as far into the distance as they could stretch without breaking.

Bathed in special electromagnetic waves and manipulated at the microcellular level, the titanium devil wires transmitted the movements of Setsura's fingers at nearly the speed of light. It was said that once entwined, as long as the unbroken filaments of the threads continued to unspool, there was no place an enemy could run, no place he could hide, to escape their grasp.

In Shinjuku, when Setsura's fingers moved, the head of a foe living in a castle in the stratosphere would drop off without a sound.

Right now those wires honed in on the deadbolt inside the lock. Setsura flexed his fingers. Like a tenacious snake with an indomitable will the wires slithered in, tightened around and severed it, as easily as a hot knife through warm butter.

With his back against the wall, Setsura reached out and gave the knob a firm push. The heavy door swung open with no more resistance than a rice paper screen.

Followed by a burst of flame, sticky and oily like napalm. The ball of fire spilled through the door into the hallway, struck the wall opposite, and spread out in both directions. The inferno continued for another three seconds before dying away.

Setsura darted in like a gust of black wind. Two SDF rangers with flame throwers were after him. The last line of defense guarding the Master's bedroom.

The two incandescent streams focused on a single point, lighting up Setsura's slicker. The orange lump splashed off the fabric and charred the floor and walls. The smell of jellied gasoline filled the air.

A follow-up attack never came. The tops of their heads split in half. They slumped to the floor.

Setsura's slicker flapped as he spun around, not an ember sticking to him. Five men stood there cradling Model 89 assault rifles, but doing nothing with them. Because their trigger fingers couldn't move.

Setsura looked elsewhere. Before the Devil Quake, the immense, twenty-five-thousand square foot studio was home to Asia's most popular music show. A gaping crack ran down the middle of the floor. On the other side of the crack was a mountain of odds and ends and

debris.

The stage lights and battens, television cameras aside, here was the mind of a fanatical collector at work—

Monitors, televisions, sound mixers, refrigerators, audio equipment, cupboards, coffee tables and sofas, automatic weapons, quiz show prizes like motor boats, bikes and computers. Even a taxicab.

Setsura focused his gaze on the midst of all this junk. Sitting at the foot of the mountain was a long, rectangular wooden box. The box was nine feet long, four and a half feet wide, and three feet high. In the center of the intricately carved lid was the golden head of a goat, entwined with a magical mandrake root.

This particular coat of arms was an unmistakable mark of evil. But Setsura wasn't as interested in the crest as the creepy object enshrined in the very center.

Eye sockets that looked like portals to hell, the pale translucent skin—sublimely beautiful in its own way—that lent it the appearance of wax sculpture. The lips pressed together in a straight line were rotting away, revealing teeth clenched in enmity and hatred.

On the other hand, the sparse mat of greasy hair glowed with an almost living light.

This was the head of an old man. And the person who placed it there fifteen years before was the owner of the head itself. Gento Roran's father. The wooden box was a casket that the "evil brood" had excavated from its resting place in the Tohan ruins. Inside that casket the devil's son had grown to adulthood.

"There it is, Gento," murmured Setsura, what that *other* genie, Gento Roran, called his "abode."

Perhaps so as not to obstruct the actions of the enthralled bodyguards, the devilish coat of arms sat there wearing a spooky smile, wrapped in the curtain of dim light descending from the ceiling.

With a derisive glance at the bodyguards, frozen there in place, Setsura sauntered up to the fissure. It was a good fifteen feet across. He raised his right hand. Without so much as a hop, he stepped toward the gap.

An infinite Hades reached down beneath him as Setsura strolled across. With footsteps as firm as if treading on solid earth, the genie arrived at the other side. He walked up to the casket and stopped.

The head had been looking to the right. Now it stared straight ahead with its eyeless eyes. After considering it for a minute, Setsura put his hand on the lid. The electronic lock wasn't latched.

Whatever the active protective and preservative measures, the wood clearly had not aged in the least. Setsura applied more force. Something flashed across the top of the casket. He jerked back as a red line welled up on the back of his hand.

He looked at the head. Wherever the soul of Byori Roran rested, he

surely would have been satisfied to know that he'd drawn blood from Setsura Aki. This was a head driven on by fierce and abiding feelings of hatred.

Setsura slightly shifted his right hand. The devil wire sent forth should have split Byori's head down the center. But not a scratch showed on its skin.

The deep-rooted sense of conviction to guard this casket shielded Byori's head from any and all assaults, Gento and Hyota being the only exceptions to that rule. Which must have been why Hyota had to be there when the evil brood brought it out.

"Three hundred sixty degrees of defense, eh?" Setsura observed.

There was no way in. There was no underestimating this opponent, an unrivaled foe. But whatever strategy he might have been formulating, his slightly narrowed eyes opened wider—

Something rose up from the depths of the fissure behind him. Spheres that resembled globes of blue-white fire. Two of them, each a foot in diameter.

Approaching the edge of the fissure, the light from above illuminated a triangular snout. There was no describing it in terms of primary colors. Countless contours ran along the slippery, shining surface, each segment glittering with its own eerie aura.

The glowing globes were eyes. The men on the other side of the fissure quaked in their boots. Bound by Setsura's devil wires, the slightest movement would have aroused the torments of hell, but such was the fear they must have felt.

Setsura didn't move. He only looked—at the creature's shadow engulfing him, the casket, and Byori's head.

It was already a dozen feet over them. The red tongue flicked out like a cracking whip. The tongue was a good six feet long, making the head at least nine. The entirety of its length, still hiding in the fissure, surely reached at least a hundred and twenty feet.

A small snake had escaped from the Ichigaya Genomic Research Center and eventually became this monster, the "Master" of Fuji TV.

Its head hovered there in the air, waiting for Setsura to turn around. Any human who sensed its presence was petrified in place, unable to attack or retreat. And the second they turned around and met its gaze, they lost what was left of their own will.

In exchange for their sanity, the terror was expunged. Some were chosen to be its guardians. No need to mention what became of those who were not, except that this was an eat or be eaten world.

Hence the people of Kawadacho lived in fear. They knew the heavy sound of that great thing softly slithering through the streets at midnight, those twin orbs glowing like a pair of headlights. Not a single other predatory beast remained in Kawadacho, not a two-headed dog or poisonous frog.

The Master waited.

Setsura didn't move.

Uncertainty welled up inside the Master. This living thing was quite different from what it had dealt with before. The shadow contracted and then surged forward with a roar. No sooner had the rank warm breath struck his neck but Setsura soared into the air.

A sound like a hammer striking steel shook the soles of his feet. The serpent had more than its two pairs of fangs. Its mouth was lined with teeth like a shark, each sharp and hard enough to pierce steel.

Looping a devil wire around one of the lighting rails in the ceiling, Setsura cast out another with his right hand. Humming like a taut piano wire, a red line circumscribed the giant serpent's head. But it dug only a few inches into the scales before being thrown back.

Similar sounds rang out from separate spots with the same result. The snake's skin possessed a remarkable elasticity.

Uncoiling with a burst of air, its scales flashing all the colors of the rainbow, the serpent soared upwards. The tongue sprang out at Setsura from its fiery red mouth. Setsura closed his eyes. Fall into the serpent's spell and it would be game over.

The devil wire shot into that gaping maw instead. And rebounded. The giant serpent shut its mouth.

The senses and intelligence of this indomitable creature were as sharp as its fangs.

Part 7: Night of the Falcon

Chapter 1

Setsura released the wire attached to the overhead lighting rail. Above his head came the harsh click of fangs snapping together.

He plunged down towards that bottomless ravine, the wind whipping at the tails of his slicker. A hot wind bathed the top of his head, the breath of the giant serpent coming hard after him.

The serpent made its den at the bottom of the fissure.

A fall to his doom seemed inevitable—until his hair slanted away to the left. The serpent's head plunged past the point he'd been a split-second before.

And sprang back.

Traced across the snout were two red lines, the tightropes Setsura had used to cross the fissure. Peering down on him from above, those two angry eyes glowed with a fierce and terrible light.

Landing on the ground, Setsura staggered and sank to his knees. Even if he wasn't looking into the eyes of the serpent, the demonic miasmas filling its gaze attacked his body like a paralyzing gas. He rose to his feet and whirled around, Gento's casket to his back.

The ghastly light engulfed him, the serpent having descended rapidly to the ground. Setsura managed to retain hold of his conscious mind. The pain penetrating his body just barely preserved the freedom of his nervous system.

Measuring the movement of the air and the presence of the demonic serpent—add to that his own intuition—and Setsura leapt sideways.



A second later, the serpent's huge head collided with the casket. It drew back, Byori's head attached to its throat. The waxy skull of the tenacious wizard sworn to protect the casket set to devouring the flesh

that had repelled even Setsura's devil wires.

The serpent sprang away. Deep within the fissure, the blackness undulated, the lashing of its torso and tail as Byori Roran chewed into the shuddering organs. It had already bored a foot-wide hole in the head. Dark red blood spilled out, bathing the head and raising clouds of white smoke.

The serpent's acidic blood could dissolve almost anything. The skull's few remaining strands of hair sloughed off, followed by the waxy skin. But it couldn't melt away that implacable will.

Spitting out a chunk of snake meat, the skull hurtled itself at the serpent's head. An unearthly shriek shook the studio walls as the skull chomped into the serpent's left eyeball.

The rest of the serpent's outrageously long body bounded up from the fissure, now exposing the entirety of its length. With a hissing roar, the creature lashed out with its tail, the blow sending its precious mound of treasure flying.

Thrown like a toy car, the taxi cab struck the stage at the back of the studio, smashed through the white veneer paneling and hit the floor with tremendous force. Gasoline spread out like a stain from the ruptured tank.

The serpent coiled the tail around its and Byori's head and squeezed as if wringing out a wet rag. The cracking sound of breaking bone echoed around the studio. The tail let go. A flattened, smashed, ugly thing tumbled to the floor.

Smearred with the poisonous blood, the floor coughed up white smoke. Fanned by the serpent's tail, the clouds swirled around the studio. Small bugs and insects hiding in the nooks and crannies above dropped down from the ceiling, painting garish splatters of color on the ground.

Half-crazed by the pain, the serpent flicked out its tongue. Sailing like a lasso over the ravine, it wrapped around its guardians and yanked them back. Spinning like tops, they sailed into its maw, where the fangs bit down. The limbs and heads hanging from its jaws snapped off and rained to the floor.

Swallowing five men in a gulp, the serpent goosenecked its head back and forth, flashing its broken gaze in all directions, searching for Setsura.

Threads of red seeped from where the devil wire bit into its scales. Ropes of blood poured from the torn left eye, painting the skin of the snake. Clearly as toxic to itself as to others, again raising wisps of steam.

However otherworldly from the start, it had become a monster that the foulest of demons would shrink from serving.

As soon as the battle between the serpent and Byori's head began, Setsura took to his heels. The serpent shook with rage. But no matter where the angry light from its glowing eyes fell, Setsura was nowhere to

be found.

Poisons befouled the air, casting psychedelic shadows across the light. Spitting out venom, flicking out its tongue, the serpent finally gave up the search. It dragged its wounded body to the fissure and slithered in head first.

Silence fell.

At least twenty minutes later, a creaking sound arose from one corner of the studio, the lid of the casket opening. A black-clad arm thrust it open from within. Setsura sat up in the casket.

“Nice nap, that,” he said, as if waking from an afternoon siesta.

With the serpent and Byori going at it tooth and fang, by the time it came looking for him the genie had crept into Gento Roran’s sleeping quarters and dozed off. And now he emerged from the casket as if it might even belong to him.

Scooping out the earth inside, Setsura noticed the fine lettering on the inside of the lid. Here were secret incantations known to only the Roran clan, a fusion of occult philosophies and cabalistic teachings rendered in Latin. This was the *sanctum sanctorum* where Gento grew up and was tutored in the mysteries while drawing power from the earth.

It wasn’t that unusual a technique, though even Setsura couldn’t begin to grasp the basic principles involved. “So,” he said under his breath, “The casket well handled his growing up and his education. Should its capabilities extend to his further development, the thing must be destroyed.”

He took a step back and raised his right hand. The blow from his devil wires awaited. With Byori’s head gone, there was nothing to defend against them.

His fingers danced instead toward the far right. He felt no response. The small figure standing in front of the door easily deflected Setsura’s devil wires.

“What did you come all the way here for?” Setsura asked, hardly taken aback by his presence.

Hyota answered in similarly matter-of-fact tones. “Gento-sama cannot sleep well in his new surroundings.”

“Well, he’d better get used to them then.”

“I would not disagree. However—”

“You’re going to give it your best shot.”

“This once it appears unavoidable.”

“And how is Gento doing these days?”

“I brought Mephisto to see him.”

“He wasn’t much good with the mystery of the seal.”

“He has a different task this time around.”

“Namely?”

“Setsura-sama—” Hyota said with great seriousness. “Gento-sama wishes to make this a mutual effort. Won’t you reconsider his offer?”

"It's pointless. Whatever spirit of cooperation might exist while the birds are still in the bush will disappear when they are in the hand."

"You are doubtless correct. But Gento is now your equal. Eventually —" Hyota left off the rest of the sentence, his voice heavy with emotion.

"He will exceed *me*? My plate keeps getting piled higher and higher with unanswered questions. After I destroy the casket."

"I have observed the two of you since you were children. I do not think even a true sibling would harbor the feelings I do. Whenever I look at you, I curse the fate that has befallen me. Nothing about that has changed even now."

"You are Gento's servant, meaning that when we engage, you must be defeated. Gento has taken note of the seal. I suppose that as well can be accounted to this casket's *education*."

"It can."

In which case, Setsura was well aware, Gento lying on the earth and entrusting his body to the spells and incantations would "educate" him all the more. He had once heard such things from his father. Which is why he came here to destroy it.

For the same reasons, Gento Roran had so impatiently desired the casket to be excavated as quickly as possible. This wooden casket held the key to both of their fates.

"There are battles and then there are battles," Setsura said, closing the lid of the casket. "What would *I* be fighting for? The seal?"

"No," Hyota shook his head.

"To seize control of the new world order?"

"No."

"For the possibility of world domination?"

"No." The answer was always the same.

"Help me out here. What's this chip on Gento's shoulder? Is he carrying on the fight because his father told him to?"

"Love and hate, joy and sadness—the two of you are quite apart from emotions such as those."

"So this is a battle fought without the ends in mind or even the desire to sally forth?" Setsura laughed without making a sound, a smile so dreadful that it froze Hyota momentarily in his tracks. "In any case, *I* will fight. Which means *your* death, Hyota."

"As well I know," Hyota nodded, in the manner of an old sage coming to inevitable blows with his star pupil.

War was hell, so the saying went. But never a literal hell like this. A war fought without the will to fight. A war won without a fight. Together they faced an inevitable showdown with death. How would Setsura strike and sever? How would Hyota die?

And yet there wasn't a speck of tension between the two. When Setsura's hands moved as well, it appeared as the most casual and ordinary of movements.

Hyota's body glowed as if reflecting every last ray of light left in the room. A split-second before the devil wires reached him, the oils erupted from his pores and covered his body.

These mysterious oils once again turned the cutting powers of the sub-micron titanium threads into butter knives.

Hyota took off running. The fissure yawned between them. He crouched down at the edge and tossed Byori's head with an underhand throw. Dripping with the poisonous blood of the serpent and radiating a demonic aura, the ordinary human teeth flashed like the mouth of a piranha as it sailed at Setsura's throat, propelled by its own will.

A dozen feet in front of Setsura it split apart lengthwise, falling like two leaves caught by a brisk gust. The serpent's blood had eaten away at that implacable will as well. Though Setsura still had to take a flying leap backwards.

Bounding over the fissure at the same time as Byori's head, Hyota waved his arms. A tiny hole—that only Setsura's eyes could perceive—opened up in the concrete floor. And only Setsura understood that this was the work of an equally tiny needle, a mere thousandth of a micron in diameter and two inches long.

When handled by Hyota, however, they became bewitched darts that could puncture steel.

Changing directions in the midst of his own flying retreat, Setsura's slicker flapped and shuddered. Hyota's needles needn't shoot in a straight line either. Batting them out of the air, Setsura landed on the stage and ducked beneath the thick planking, fallen in like broken timbers.

Ripples ran across the surface, the impacts gouging out fist-sized holes. Hyota's footsteps came closer and stopped.

Echoes of laughter that couldn't possibly be laughter floated up from beneath the flooring. A ghastly sort of humor that would make the dead shake with fear, to say nothing of Hyota or any other living thing.

"Splendid, Hyota. You caught me. That's as far as you'll get."

It could just as well have been a bluff. But Hyota retreated.

A soft *ping* rang out. A dark shadow engulfed Hyota. The lighting rail fell from the ceiling and struck Hyota across the shoulders. It almost immediately slid off. Following the slight slant of the floor, it slid toward the fissure.

"I can't cut you, but what about a little poking and prodding?"

In concert with the question, the skeletal shaft of the posts and lighting rail swung back into the air on invisible strings like the teeth of a giant rake.

Hyota didn't move.

This new weapon rushed toward his small frame. The phalanx of jutting spears all skidded off him and vectored away in a different direction.

In simple physical terms, striking Hyota dead center and square on, the posts and lighting rail should have shot straight through his body, despite whatever oil he was coated in. Moreover, considering the contours of the human form, if Hyota was even close to the center of movement this became an impossible feat.

“Is that all, Setsura-sama?” he asked blithely. He might have even sounded a little sad.

There was no answer.

“Well, then. Say your prayers.”

He stretched out his hands, still full of those fearsome needles. A red line circumscribed his stout neck. It grew thicker, blood spraying out in all directions an instant after that.

As the head slipped off his shoulders, Hyota reached up and returned it to where it belonged. It was one thing for a skilled surgeon to reattach a severed head, but a headless—

In Gento’s hideout, a similar trick had been performed on the giant. But that was the combination of Gento’s necrodancing and Mephisto’s medical skills.

There were men of magic here too.

“*Splendid—work—Setsura—sama—but—how—?*” Hyota asked in a strangely hoarse voice, the result of forcing his severed organs back together again.

Setsura’s hand jutted out from the planks. “I gave this a try.”

He held up his right wrist, the teeth marks still showing. The increased sharpness of the devil wires in the dominant hand, that he’d refrained from using to be on the safe side, had finally broken through the sheen of oil.

However they might lock horns, he’d loved him from the time he was a child. His heart filled with grief, and up to the moment they engaged he had wept over his fate.

To then take his head without hesitation—Setsura Aki, that beautiful genie, was truly a destroying angel. Without a second glance at Hyota, he turned toward the casket. The final *coup de grâce* still awaited. The game-ending shot.

Blue-white flames licked at his feet. Setsura dove backwards as the wall of fire whooshed up. The gasoline from the taxi cab the serpent had smashed. The roaring conflagration swept back his hair and ruffled the sleeves of his slicker.

Beyond the fissure, he saw two figures standing at the door. The girl writhing in pain, wearing a white blouse and skirt was Kotomi. The man standing next to her, his arm around her waist, wearing a beguiling smile and an Inverness topcoat—

“So the favorite’s decided to throw his hat into the ring,” Setsura called out to him.

“Precisely,” Gento Roran answered with a broad smile. “The time to

settle things has arrived sooner than expected.”

Gento said, “I found her wandering around near the studio and so asked about you. She led me here. Hyota knew this was the lair of the Master, but she proved helpful in any case. Seems her benefactor had ventured into a most dangerous place, and she had gone for help. Admirable sentiments. So I rose to the occasion.”

At that point, toyed with in unseen ways, Kotomi arched her back. Gento explained with an evil smile, “You should be able to guess from her deportment what kind of pain she is tasting, and how and where she is being chastened.” He spoke softly, as befitting a devil about his business. “What to do, what to do? Release her. Or not. It’s all the same to me. But if I do, I expect just compensation in exchange.”

“Hyota is here too.”

“Irrelevant. You know well his willingness to die happily for my welfare.”

“Why should the girl prove any more valuable?”

“Perhaps she is of no use to the you that is *you*. But what about the you that leads such a sentimental, mundane life the rest of the time? Saving the girl who tried to kill you could prove lethal. First, I’ll have you step away from my abode.”

Setsura was standing right next to it. Gento reached out and made a beckoning motion with his left hand. The casket began to slide away.

“Hyota, get my father’s head and get on board.”

The black silhouette perched unsteadily on the lid of the casket. Cradling Byori’s split head in one hand, the other couldn’t quite hold his own in place. The casket slipped through the flames and approached the fissure and floated across it. The same technique that Setsura had used.

“I would love to throw down with you here and now, but my abode takes precedence. We’ll meet again soon enough.”

With a wink that would make any woman go weak in the knees, Gento departed with Hyota, leaving Kotomi behind.

Setsura crossed the fissure. Cutting the devil wires binding Kotomi wasn’t difficult. Her face, twisted with pain, briefly showed a broad smile.

A springing, uncoiling sound rang out from inside her body. Setsura jumped back. Her face clouded over. Kotomi screamed. Dozens of red lines crisscrossed her body. The screams stopped. The air sparkled red.

A myriad of red coils sprang from her body. Zigzagging back and forth, they streaked at Setsura. Sliced apart from the inside out, Kotomi crumbled to the ground, a cruel lump of flesh.

Keeping one eye on her, Setsura cast out his devil wires. The blood-drenched coils fell to the ground where they hopped and spun, but like insects meeting insecticide, soon fell still.

With a glance at the squirming organs buried inside the bloody mass, Setsura made for the door. The far side of the fissure was already a furnace. Almost in concert with these movements, two tendrils of flame snaked across the gap, splashed against what once had been Kotomi, and covered the floor like a sheen of oil.

The door had barely closed when the entirety of Studio 13 was engulfed in the fires of hell.

Chapter 2

Mayumi looked out the window. The silver rain stabbed like needles against the charcoal gray streets. Her heart felt the same color as the city. A girl of not yet twenty, remembering everything her body had aroused thus far, such a conclusion was inevitable.

Four men had sex with her. Four men died, among them her father. She'd killed her mother, stabbed her to death with a knife. True, her mother was trying to kill her, but dead was dead. Then there were the biker gang members who'd raped her. They were all corpses by now.

Then sold to the Death Match organizers, who'd experimented on her with that junkie werewolf. She killed him, too.

Even lacking the intent, her body had nevertheless done the deed, the same as with her own two hands. However "justifiable self-defense" might stand her in good stead with the law, such rationalizations did little for her conscience.

Mayumi had no idea how to proceed from here. Those two men in the Coliseum—the most handsome she'd ever seen—fought over her, and one of them referred to her as the "seal." It must be connected to the supernatural phenomenon arising inside her. But the deeper reasons, how everything was connected, she couldn't comprehend.

And what did it matter anyway? Staring out at the rain-drenched city, Mayumi finally came to an understanding of what she must do. Though the joy she'd felt after killing her mother and leaving home was long gone, the desire to go far, far away burned all the stronger inside of her.

A knock came at the door. The nurse—the one with the cool, pale skin—had arrived for her noon checkup. The nurse only saw the shadows surging at her from the right of the door frame a split-second before the silver vase smashed against the side of her head.

Mayumi watched her drop without a flicker of guilt.

The nurse hadn't hit the ground before turning into a mummy and breaking apart in a cloud of gray dust. Even then Mayumi barely registered any surprise. She'd heard of wizards and witches who fashioned furniture and household implements out of ectoplasm. Apparently the maker of this nurse shared similar talents.

Mayumi changed into the nurse's uniform. She tucked her clothing under her arm and was about to slip out of the room when another

nurse and an orderly came in, both sporting the same pale faces.

"Resistance is futile. The monitors always know where you are and what you are doing."

Mayumi picked up a chair and swung it at her as hard as she could. The unfazed nurse took it from her and set it down. The orderly grabbed her around the shoulders and pressed a jet injector against her neck.

A cool, relaxing tide swept through her body. Mayumi slumped to her knees.

"What a troublesome patient," said the orderly, indicating the pile of ash on the floor.

"Happens all the time," said the nurse, and she spit onto the floor.

Whatever chemical change this aroused, the ash on the floor rose like a raised pole and in almost the same instant assumed the shape of a human being. Though the resurrected nurse looked a tad paler and cooler than before.

The three left the room. Mayumi fell into a deep sleep.

She opened her eyes to find a beautiful face peering down at her. It belonged to the man who'd saved her at the Coliseum. His name was Setsura Aki.

"So you're awake?" he said with a friendly smile that set Mayumi's mind at ease. At the Coliseum, the drugs having muddled her thoughts, she'd keenly felt a harsh and unforgiving air about him—that now had completely evaporated. Replaced by that of a well-bred child.

"I heard you clobbered one of the nurses. At this hospital, a good seventy percent of the staff are *them*. One is said to be as strong as seven ordinary people. You must have really struck the mark."

"Pure luck," answered Mayumi, as if under his spell. "What's going to happen to me?"

"You'll have to stay in the hospital for a little while longer. After that, the police want to take you into custody."

"I don't mean that. What do the two of *you* want from me?"

"We don't really know," Setsura said, scratching his head.

"He called me the seal. What does that mean?"

"I was hoping that *I* would know," Setsura said, feigning complete ignorance. "But as for *me*, haven't a clue."

Mayumi turned toward the window. Dusk was falling. The garish glow of the neon lights from Kabuki-cho and Shinjuku Nichome lit up the darkening gloom. The next question from Setsura took her by surprise.

"You want to go there?"

"What, are you some sort of superman?"

"I own a *senbei* shop."

A curious look rose to Mayumi's face. "You have an interesting taste

in fashion.”

“You want out of here?”

“Yeah.” She nodded.

“Not a bad idea. The living is tough, but when it comes to getting by on your own, this city is easier than the outside world.”

“My mother said the same thing. *The world out there*, she liked to say, *is a bear*. People who live in this city have it the best. You may not find happiness here. But in exchange, no one’s going to give you grief for just about anything you do. That’s what I want for myself right now.”

“Sounds pretty darn close to happiness to me.”

Setsura looked out the window as well. Demon City was stained in India ink. People went everywhere and lived everywhere, to the ends of the earth. They lived in Demon City. They came to Demon City to shuck off all the constraints that once defined them as human. And if their wishes came true, wouldn’t they call that the pursuit of happiness?

In this city they harbored rage and sadness and suffering, were afflicted in body and spirit. And they *lived*.

In Demon City Shinjuku.

“You were good enough to bring me here,” Mayumi said, softly fixing her eyes on Setsura’s profile. “Do you know what my *illness* is?”

Setsura nodded.

Mayumi looked back at him silently. His eyes seemed to draw her into their endless depths. Seeing herself reflected in them, she felt a scorching sadness well up inside of her.

“I don’t want to know, but I can’t help knowing. Any man that sleeps with me dies. Or even tries. Despite any intentions of my own. They turn into slobbering ogres. You’re the one who brought me here—”

“Yeah.”

“When all this is over and done with, could you take me somewhere out there? Somewhere peaceful and quiet, where there aren’t many men around.”

Mayumi looked into his eyes. Perhaps she saw the gray city floating there in the depths of that endless black.

“I don’t care what the seal means, or what’s going to happen after this. Everything comes to an end eventually. And when it does—”

Setsura nodded. “I promise.”

“I’m counting on it. What do you think I should do after this?”

“Stay here for a while longer. There’s another man I’m looking for, and the syndicate that runs the Death Match is on the move. No matter who might be after you, this hospital is hell’s gate for them. They wouldn’t get past the lobby. You won’t find a safer refuge anywhere else.”

“That’s right. Mephisto Hospital is safer than Hades itself.” Mayumi smiled a mature and knowing smile. Children here, it was said, aged a few years faster than in the outside world. A real world more real than

any other had that effect.

A city that a girl of not yet twenty called hell.

The phone next to the bed rang. Mayumi picked it up. "It's for you," she said, handing it to Setsura.

A familiar voice announced that he had returned. Mephisto was back.

The two men met in the examination room. Outside the room, patients came and went in a constant hubbub of activity. Every hospital in Demon City was open twenty-four seven, constantly taking emergency cases and referrals from the rest of Tokyo as well.

"You're sure in a good mood," Setsura wryly remarked. His always indifferent demeanor made the occasional hint of disagreeableness all the more striking.

"All thanks to you," Mephisto said, lightly deflecting the expected criticism.

"Hyota filled me in. A helluva friend you are."

"You're hardly the one to talk," he said with a piercing side glance. Jealousy suffused his gaze. Those who knew the cool-headedness of the hospital director would surely have been thrown for a loop.

"What have you been up to?" Setsura countered, looking the other way.

"Doctor-patient confidentiality prevents me from revealing such details. I have been compensated for my services."

"So you'll do anything for money, eh? Quack."

"Morally inflexible people get on my nerves. In any case, I called you here in order to deliver a message."

"About what?"

"The deal will go down tomorrow evening at ten o'clock at the altar on Yasukuni Avenue. The terms are Sasaki in exchange for—"

"Mayumi."

"Precisely. So now you know. Whether you show up or not is up to you. If anybody gets hurt in the process, be sure to bring them here."

"You're a cold man."

"And proud of it."

Setsura sighed and sat back on the couch. "So what *do* you know about the girl?"

"In pathological terms, not a thing," Mephisto said without hesitation. He propped his elbows on the table between them and tented his fingers. The ring on the middle finger of his left hand glittered.

Setsura narrowed his eyes slightly. "How about in other terms?"

"It might be best to alter our diagnostic approach and consider a field of study in the mystical arts."

"Witch doctoring is your specialty."

"That line was getting old a long time ago."

"So what will it get us?"

"I do not know. Except that the odds of success should prove better than the current course of treatment."

Setsura stared at the ceiling. A long pause later he said, "Well, this complicates things. Hand her over and for all I know, Gento will get some *real* witch doctor to cut her open."

"Probably. But if she is worth as much to him as to you, there may be less cause for concern. No matter how strange the disease, if it spreads, more harm than good will be the result."

"And if we can crack the secret before more harm than good is done, then the rest doesn't matter. Any guarantees that you can figure out what this seal business is about without *you* doing more harm than good?"

"The seal has nothing to do with me," Mephisto said, a touch of temper in his voice. "In any case, *you* are the only person who can offer this patient any guarantees. Leave her in this hospital and no one else shall lay a finger on her. Take her elsewhere and I won't stop you. That choice is up to you."

Setsura grimaced. The remark hit home. "So, tomorrow evening."

"Tomorrow evening. You have plenty of time to think things over."

"You're still not interested in uncovering your patient's secrets?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Hey, you'd get to keep me company for the night."

"This particular *you* interests me not at all," Mephisto said crisply.

Setsura stared at the ceiling and sighed.

"Seeing as you've come all the way here," Mephisto said, as if the previous conversation hadn't happened, "I might as well check you out."

He got up and examined Setsura's right hand. Not only had the bite wound he'd received at the Coliseum not healed, but using his hand to lop off Hyota's head had bruised the tendons and bone. It was too good of an opportunity to let pass.

The examination was over in ten minutes. Setsura got out of the MRI machine, changed back into his street clothes and returned to the exam room. Mephisto's attention was focused on the wall screen display.

"Something turn up? Cancer?"

Mephisto didn't move.

"Hey." Now Mephisto turned around. Sensing a flicker of something in the otherwise placid face, Setsura said, "What's up?"

"Nothing, or so I would like to say. But the poker face is not my forte for good reasons. Have you felt anything amiss of late?"

"Not besides the obvious."

"Has anything unusual been happening to you lately? Besides the obvious, of course. In short, have you found yourself capable of performing some activity you hadn't been able to before?"

Setsura shook his head. "How about you get to the point?"

"Just as well," Mephisto muttered, tapping his index finger against his forehead. "Just as well. That would fit. But hardly surprising if so. Such a development—"

"What?"

"There are no changes in your individual organs. However, looking at the *gestalt* of your physiology, certain abnormalities are showing up."

"There's nothing wrong with all the parts, but the whole is changing. Could you at least give me a hint?"

"I don't know. The mainframe is working on it as we speak. As things stand now, we may have to access the supercomputer at the Ministry of Defense. Come back in if you don't hear from me first. The analysis should be complete by tomorrow evening."

"Perhaps the situation is the same with Gento, too?"

Mephisto looked at Setsura with shining eyes, the light of an implacable tenacity. "Ah, him. I had expected that we would meet at some later date. It may come sooner than expected."

Setsura returned the look. He alone could peer beneath the Demon Physician's emotionless facade and see the regret lingering there. Whatever reason Gento had summoned Mephisto for had nothing to do with his own "growth."

The target was coming into focus. Which generated a whole new batch of questions. What sort of shock, to turn things around, would induce him to divulge a patient's secrets to a third party? What changes were also taking place in Setsura's body?

The two comely countenances had both donned demeanors of deep thought when the intercom rang. Mephisto's ring blinked. Another display screen appeared on the wall.

"They're here for you, I believe," he said, glancing from the image of the five men in suits standing just inside the automatic lobby doors to Setsura. He looked pleased.

"Some rent-a-cops have been keeping an eye on the hospital. Hyota dispatched two of them this morning. Acquaintances of yours?"

"Now that you mention it, a couple have been hanging around. I pretend to be out."

A man with a bald head like an octopus was speaking to the receptionist. With a flick of her finger, her voice flowed through the speakers. "Yoshihiro Asai-san, a senior director for the Shinjuku Restoration Society."

The sparkle in Mephisto's eyes grew all the more intense. "The Shinjuku Restoration Society is the godfather of the criminal syndicates. How do you wish to proceed?"

Setsura started toward the door. "That baldy looks like he means business."

Behind him, Mephisto got to his feet. "It's been a while since your threads have revealed themselves in all their dexterous glory."

The prospect of seeing this killing technique in action practically made him shake with joy. Compared to these two, the lackeys of these mob bosses were pretty damned ordinary.

Baldy bowed upon seeing the two of them. His hair had receded all the way from his forehead. The swirl of hair that was left painted a black pattern on his pate.

“My name is Asai. I am pleased to meet you.”

“Please sit down,” Mephisto said, not deigning to introduce himself. He offered him a chair.

“No, that’s fine. If it is all right with you, we would like to invite you along to accommodations of our own. No, not you, Doctor. The young man.”

The pleasant smile on his face couldn’t hide the emotions in his eyes. Eyes like a snake. Eyes of the archetypal villain. He must be good at getting what was asked of him. This type was a dime a dozen in big business, starting off all deferential, but sooner or later carrying the weight of the entire enterprise on their shoulders.

He’d climbed the corporate criminal ladder kissing up to his superiors and selling out his subordinates. Once he’d gotten his hands on that brass ring, this kind of bottom feeder fully intended to count his own and the company’s success as one and the same. The worst of the crime families were turning into a bunch of men in gray flannel suits.

“And what business would you have with him?” Mephisto asked.

Setsura interrupted and said in a lazy voice, “Let’s cut to the chase, Baldy. What if I say no?”

The balding head darkened in a flash. Laboring to keep the snarl from his lips, he said, “You gotta leave here sometime, kid. Keeping people waiting tends to tick them off. Besides, we didn’t come here to put the hurt on you. There might even be some room here for cooperation and compromise. Let’s talk it over.”

“A negotiation with the mob, eh,” Setsura said, stretching mightily. “Sure, why not? Let’s hear what you have to say.”

Asai reined in his temper. When it counted, he was a man who could summon up great reserves of patience, the kind of patience it took to kiss all the ass that got him where he was today.

“Are you telling me there’s no way to convince you to accompany us to our premises?”

“Not bloody likely.”

“Then we have no choice but to stay here until you do.”

“Do you intend to raise a ruckus in the hospital?” Mephisto asked softly.

Asai paled a bit, cleared his throat, and said, “Rest assured you have nothing to worry about. Come along quietly.”

“Nobody will be coming along quietly. Neither can you leave. No patients come to this hospital and, still breathing, choose to stay. Though some boasting of no physical defects at all have, from time to time, been known to go missing.”

Asai raised his hand. Four men at the receptionist’s desk started towards them.

“Stand down, Setsura,” Mephisto murmured, twisting the ring on his finger.

A woman in white passed in front of the three like a shadow. The suits looked down their noses at the nurse standing in front of them. They were men who made a specialty of eradicating life, honing their skills on the monsters and demons that nested here in Shinjuku.

They carried five-round, hand-held missile launchers in the holsters under their arms. Guided by a visual recognition guidance system and streaking along at Mach three, one missile could light up an area sixty feet in diameter with two hundred thousand degrees of heat.

But now they were going to get up close and personal with a fear greater than anything else in their knowledge.

The nurse’s slender hands swept sideways. Two of the men flew backwards with crushed throats. The remaining two were halted in midair as they tried to retreat, the nurse’s arms buried in their stomachs up to her wrists.

Puncturing the abdominals of these mountain-sized men like tissue paper, she wrenched her hands and tore out their insides. Having seen to their gruesome mutual demise, throwing the two blood-soaked bodies over her shoulders, she marched back to the elevator.

Asai’s gaze was glued to her back. His forehead was covered with a sheen of sweat. His shirt was plastered to his chest.

Smiling, almost elfin eyes looked into his terror-stricken ones. “It is human nature to never learn from one’s mistakes, but a yakuza’s threats have little entertainment value. Do you know what will happen to them? Downstairs is a most efficient and well-equipped vivisection room. Brain cells in particular are useless once dead, so it’s best to conduct the procedures while the donor is still alive. You, too.”

Asai’s face twisted in fear. Mephisto gently restrained his raised hands. That alone froze the yakuza’s errand boy in place.

“If—if—you kill me—”

Mephisto’s forefinger touched his trembling lips. He whispered as if to a beloved child, “Time to take a nap.”

He lowered his hand and pushed his finger through Asai’s Adam’s apple. Asai’s eyes rolled back in his head. When Mephisto drew back his hand, not a drop of blood was left behind. Not the hint of a wound marred Asai’s skin.

Mephisto practiced as well in the field of psychic surgery, its effectiveness well-established for many years now, able to remove

tumors without leaving a scar.

He said to the nurses that materialized like specters behind him, "Take him away."

Asai slumped down into the chair. Perched on his knee was a disgusting, blue-green lump. A toad. Peering out from the warty skin, the heavy glistening eyes took in Setsura and Mephisto.

"Hoh," said the delighted Mephisto. "It looks like somebody else has been stealing a march on Gento."

Chapter 3

The rain didn't let up towards evening. The streaks of silver only seemed to multiply.

Even in this corner of Takada no Baba Ichome near Waseda University, where the damage from the Devil Quake was comparably light, were remarkable patches of destruction. Here and there among the heaps of rubble were rows of prefab houses and shotgun shacks.

From a distance and at a glance, it appeared as a street of stores and houses immediately following reconstruction.

But those who took one step down that street without a clear purpose or resolve were likely to furrow the brows and pinch the nose. And realizing the true nature of their surroundings, frown and return the way they came, muffling their steps so as to not arouse the attention of those who lived there.

The tails of his black Inverness topcoat flapping like a pair of folded wings, Gento Roran visited the street that evening, shortly before those five yakuza showed up at Mephisto Hospital.

The gnarled gas street lamps cast curious shadows where his black leather boots tread the worn cobblestones.

The shades were closed in the windows of the houses lining the street. The light leaking out from the cracks in the curtains at times turned blue or multicolored, like the sidelong glance of a seductress, revealing a glimpse of the mysterious experiments being conducted inside.

In front of Gento, a team of six horses drawing a carriage appeared out of the darkness. Their hooves tread silently on the cobblestones. The wheels raised nary a creak of sound. And yet it drew closer and passed by with a rush of wind, the falling rain splashing off the horses and carriage.

The coachman waved his whip. Through the windows of the carriage could be seen what appeared to be four children, all wrapped in a phosphorescent glow.

A rich scent wafted on the disturbed air.

"Ah," Gento murmured with a keen sense of satisfaction. *Aurum Potabile*, philosopher's tincture, quintessence of bat liver, pickled lung of tarantula—the glories of Prague surely thrived here.

All would be found in any witch's medicine cabinet, the stock and

trade of alchemy.

Speaking of which, etched into the doors of these prefab dwellings were fire-breathing basilisks and unicorns. The weather vanes spinning on the roofs sported creepy-looking lizards instead of roosters. From parts unknown came the muttering of spells spoken in Latin.

This was Magic Town.

Not only criminals and outlaws came to Shinjuku after the Devil Quake. Headlong iconoclasts, parlor revolutionaries and practitioners of the dark arts mingled together there, along with a considerable number of witches and warlocks from every corner of the globe.

They needed a place where true magical research could be conducted, where the equipment and the tools and the funding could be brought together, a place drenched in the psychic elements. There wasn't a better place than Demon City Shinjuku.

And so men and women wrapped in black cloaks filled the main street, the corners and the back alleys. Day and night came the heavy smell of sulfur and the whispering of strange spells, turning this little corner of the city dark as a caldron.

Gento came to a halt in front of a ramshackle building. Water as thick as paint poured into the ditch from a drainage pipe. There was a clay tablet next to the wooden door in the shape of a circular astrological chart. He pressed on the center. A metallic gong rang out on the other side of the door.

Next to the jamb, a vertical line of light emerged and grew wider. Bathed in a brilliant flood of light, as if the whole house itself was incandescent, was a girl of seven or eight with golden hair and blue eyes. Her face showed her Slavic features. Her skin was an almost transparent white.

Perhaps in keeping with the neighborhood, she was wearing a black satin dress. In fluent Japanese she said, "How may I help you?"

"My name is Gento Roran. Would your grandmother happen to be in?"

"She is in, but she is not. You have twenty-six ribs."

"I do."

The door opened wider and he was shown in.

The living room was graced by old-style furniture. The fixtures in the cupboard, the coat hooks on the wall were all made of brass. The air was pleasantly cool, though there was nothing like an air conditioner in the house. Despite the light pouring forth, no oily flame burned in the glowing brass lamp in the ceiling.

"This way."

Without a moment's hesitation, the girl showed Gento to the door in the back. Gento stepped into the square dark space. As soon as the girl closed the door behind her, a blue flame flickered to life in front of them.

The burning blue candle sat on the round black table. The girl stood on the other side. The pale ring of light revealed a room filled with a potpourri of bizarre objects.

"Please sit down," said the girl.

Gento took note of the chair behind him and sat down. A wooden chair with a firm cushion.

"I apologize for the age of the furnishings," she said. "The seat must be hard."

"Oh, it's fine. Where has your grandmother gone off to?" Gento asked, becoming aware of a strange essence suffusing the air.

"There was something she needed to get done. But I will listen to whatever our curious visitor has to say, this man without an astrological sign."

She spoke in the manner of a presumptuous child, sounding oddly beyond her apparent years.

Gento neither took affront nor regarded her with any doubt or suspicion. "I would like you to investigate a young woman. An entirely ordinary person, she would seem. Doctor Mephisto has detected nothing unusual about her. However—"

"You had Doctor Mephisto examine her—" Something akin to a grimace rose to the girl's glassy doll-like face. "In that case, I'm afraid I have nothing more to add."

"That is what everybody says. The witches and warlocks elsewhere as well. The only person who might examine a patient of Doctor Mephisto's and come to a different conclusion is your mistress, Galeen Nuvenberg."



“So what troubles this young woman?”

“I do not know.” Asked the same question Mayumi had asked Setsura at the hospital, Gento gave her the same answer. “But if the powers of

your mistress are anything close to what the rumors say, I'm sure an explanation will be forthcoming."

"We accept." The girl nodded her head. Her hair spilled around her face like a wave of golden threads.

"Are you sure? You don't want to discuss the matter with her first?"

"When Grandmother is not in, she leaves everything in my care. Her wishes are mine and mine are hers."

"Understood."

"But first—"

The girl got up and walked to the wall behind her, where the stuffed heads of a deer, bear, owl, anaconda, goat and bat were mounted. Also on the wall was a curved scimitar, six feet long and sans the scabbard.

The girl retrieved it and held it up to him with both hands, as though it wasn't any heavier than a shaft of bamboo. Gento grasped the sword by the hilt. The wavering light of the candle stained the blade with blue foxfire.

"With a single stroke, cut off my head with this sword."

Gento simply looked back at her.

"You cannot? You cannot do something as simple as cut off a child's head, and yet you call upon my grandmother's services—"

The rest of the sentence evaporated into a *whish* of air. Showing hardly any resistance, the head soared toward the dark ceiling. Holding the bloody sword in one hand, Gento Roran followed its trajectory with his eyes.

He arose and looked down at the body at his feet. Lying face down, her hands planted on the floor, the girl raised her torso. With a small smile, Gento slashed with the scimitar at the level of his eyes. The microscopic strings severed, the headless body slumped back down and didn't move.

The doll-like girl with the ceramic skin was in fact—a doll.

"A man most befitting his horoscope," came the girl's voice from the door, accompanied by a flood of light.

Gento whirled around. The slight figure painted a silhouette against the shaft of light. A gentle draft wafted the golden threads like a halo around her face.

"You definitely accepted my commission. Let us cut to the chase and make our introductions."

"I'm sorry, but I cannot reach her." The girl raised her hand to her mouth and smiled. "Hoh. Who do you think my mistress is? She is Galeen Nuvenberg."

"I know," said Gento, brushing past her and through the door. Crossing the living room he said, "How soon will your grandmother be done with her present business?"

"I cannot say. This business, not to mention our patrons, are a tad out of the ordinary."

“Oh?”

“She is presently on her way to see Doctor Mephisto.”

Gento stopped in his tracks. Then, “Could you tell me on whose behalf?” he said, resuming his pace from before.

“Alas, but no.”

He could have pressed the matter, but doubted it would have any effect. Besides, he was on the girl’s home ground.

Gento went outside. The door closed behind him. A light rain was falling. Faint tendrils of smoke rose from the surrounding chimneys. The residents here were hard at work mixing elixirs and conducting alchemy.

All this concocting of murderous curses, illegal opiates and precious metals made Magic Town a frequent destination for the criminal element. And one of them had made it here ahead of Gento. Furthermore—

“With the same goal in mind? The number of my troubles has just increased by one more.”

As Gento strode off into the darkness, his eyes burned with the dark fires of a deep and dogged determination.

Mayumi slept quietly, Mephisto’s recommended meditations and medications having done their magic.

Setsura was pondering what to do next. The parlay for Azusa would take place tomorrow night. Thinking about it coolly, the exchange was hardly an equal one.

Mayumi was the “seal” who held the fate of not only this city, but perhaps the whole world in her hand. Azusa was nothing more than a whirlwind that blew in uninvited.

But that didn’t mean he could just leave her to die at the side of the road. Gento Roran had ended her brother’s life as well. They made for a pitiful pair.

On top of that, a new enemy had stepped onto the stage. When Baldy, the yakuza capo, met his end, that toad made its appearance. Setsura didn’t lose much sleep when it came to the syndicates. There were plenty of ways to skin those cats.

The problem was that toad.

The toad glared up at them with venomous eyes as Asai met his demise. Then the toad enlarged, expanded and blew up like a balloon.

There was no telling who made the first move, but a sickly green line shot between Setsura and Mephisto. Behind them, one of the nurses screamed, covered her face with her hands and fell to the floor. In a flash, her body turned into gray-white ectoplasm and dissolved away. This was strong poison.

Without a sound, Asai and the chair he was sitting on split apart.

“Whoa,” Mephisto said softly.

Dodging Setsura’s attack, the mottled dark green creature jumped—with the strength of a kangaroo—through the air.

Setsura’s right hand and Mephisto’s ring flashed together. This time the toad split in two while in midair and splattered to the floor, its guts flying out in a cloud of white steam. The same fate as the nurse. This creature was made of ectoplasm too.

“My, my, my. It’s been two hundred years since I last faced such a dreadful duo.”

The men in question whirled around to face the door. Until they heard the voice, they’d had no inkling that she was there. She was barely three feet tall, was wearing a black satin dress, and was almost as thin as her cane.

The blue eyes in her wrinkled face, looking like taffy drawn out and folded over, shone with an eerie light. The long silver hair falling to her waist shook with anger and laughter. Here was an old woman of an undeterminable age.

“Galeen Nuvenberg,” Setsura Aki said.

“Setsura Aki and Doctor Mephisto. Or rather, the best P.I. and the best physician in Shinjuku. The pleasure is all mine.”

The old woman smiled, flashing her yellow teeth. Though she was standing behind the thick glass door, her words rang out clearly.

“You think doing away with that underling wraps everything up in a nice bow? Let me pick up where he left off. Setsura Aki, if you don’t want the syndicates dogging your every move, it’s time to hand over Mayumi, that girl you saved. Leave her care and treatment to me.”

“Sorry, but she’s already got a primary care physician,” Setsura calmly replied. “From all the rumors I’ve heard about you, I figured our paths would cross eventually. I didn’t think you would so perfectly fit the stereotype though. How many men have met their maker at your hands?”

The old woman laughed without making a sound. “What are you trying to say, boy? I’ve heard plenty about you too, but I hardly imagined a man so wet behind the ears.”

“What would you do with the young woman once you got your hands on her?” Mephisto asked.

“The syndicates have got their blood up. To start with, they’re out for revenge on Setsura for busting up the Death Match. But then there’s the reason why he’d do such a thing in the first place. And the cause comes back to that girl. Knowing they’d be kicking that nest of hornets, Setsura Aki and Gento Roran went in to snatch her anyway. She must be hiding some pretty dark secrets. So one of their errand boys comes to see me. But I’d been looking into this Gento Roran chap already.”

“Then what will you do next?” Setsura asked.

Mephisto glanced at him, somewhat taken aback. The Demon

Physician knew that *this* Setsura was no longer Setsura.

“Do you wish to settle things with *me* right now?”

“In which case,” Mephisto added, “I would have no choice but to back him up.”

The old woman froze for a second, before the smile returned to her face. “Let’s call it a day, shall we? A woman of my long years is hardly able to take on the two of you at the drop of a hat. I’ll settle for something else instead.”

She took a step backwards. And was swallowed up in the darkness.

Setsura touched his forehead. It was damp with sweat from the tension of the exchange.

“That’s a first,” Mephisto said, referring to Setsura’s sweaty brow, and touching his own with apparent alarm.

Setsura turned on his heel and headed for the elevators. Mephisto followed without asking where he was going.

It took them less than two minutes to reach Mayumi’s room. Everything was in its proper place—except for the patient. The sheets were still warm. She must have been there until only a few minutes before. A draft blew through the open window.

She hadn’t faded through the walls or dissolved into a mist. Mayumi had escaped the hospital from the window. On the seventh floor. The two of them had to believe that Mayumi was the “something else” the old woman, Galeen Nuvenberg, had “settled for.”

“Hmm,” mused Mephisto. “This leaves me all the more interested in that exchange planned for tomorrow.”

As per his usual, he hit that particular rhetorical nail right on the head.

Morning came soon enough, as did the inevitable night. During that time, Setsura’s investigations led him nowhere fast.

Galeen Nuvenberg, not to mention her employer, Tosuke Kokonori of the Shinjuku Restoration Society, were nowhere to be found. Their homes and offices were shuttered, with not a hint of life within. Proof of how fearsome an opponent Setsura could be.

Given enough time, he could ferret them out. But with only sixteen hours to work with, he was fighting a rising tide. He’d tracked down several of Kokonori’s underlings, but threats and intimidation notwithstanding, they didn’t know a thing either.

Nuvenberg’s incredible *qi* shielded her from even supernatural manhunting measures.

Yasukuni Avenue was as still as death. Nobody passed this way at night. The rain stopped. The moon came out. Though it too hardly seemed the same, the moonlight swirling around in a smoky specter. As if it was riding on the wind itself.

Which was entirely possible in Demon City.

As were the three mismatched figures standing next to the altar in front of the entrance to Hanazono Shrine, not far from the station.

The first was a naked woman, around five-foot seven. The second was a ten-foot-tall giant with an unnaturally small head. The third was a young man wearing an Inverness topcoat.

The woman's right hand was secured to one of the columns. She wasn't moving at all, secured there as if by some invisible power. Another naked woman lay at her feet. Her vacant eyes and incoherent mumblings identified her at a glance as a crazy person.

Fresh steel bound the woman's wrists to the columns. Add to that the altar, the crazy woman—this all had the stench of some abominable black magic.

Not to mention the remaining two, Siegfried sporting Yamada's head, and Gento Roran.

"He coming?" Siegfried asked. All the more surprising was his clear articulation. He had on a pair of jeans, but was naked from the waist up.

"Don't know," Gento said. "Perhaps tormenting this woman some more will make the time pass faster?"

The words had hardly left his mouth when Azusa writhed in wordless agony, the pain inflicted by the devil wires binding her. She groaned and arched her back, bending so far back as to expose the undersides of her arms, her breasts shaking.

The means invisible to the vacant eye, a crease dented the skin around her left nipple.

"Is Setsura going to show?" Gento said, not looking at her. "Yes?" Blood erupted around the nipple. "Or no?"

The nipple tore away and dropped to her feet. Crimson streaks lined her skin. Gento picked it up and pressed it against her mouth.

"This is yours. Good for nothing but a man's pacifier. Suck on it yourself."

Azusa clamped her mouth shut. But soon threw her head back, gasping for air. With a cruel and pitiless determination, Gento shoved in the severed nipple. His white fingers closed over her lips as she tried to spit it out. A trickle of red saliva dribbled from the corners of her mouth.

This was Gento Roran. The same somehow sorrowful young man who had seized Azusa and laid her on the mound and told her to speak with the earth. Growing up for him meant becoming a merciless demon.

Tears spilled from the corners of her eyes.

"Stop it," came an unexpected voice from above him. Yamada's head peered down, colored by unbridled disgust.

"Why should I?"

"Rather than tormenting the girl, consider why Setsura might not have arrived at this time. In five minutes, it will be eleven o'clock. And

five or six minutes until *it* shows up. If Setsura doesn't come, *we* will be in its sights."

"Relax. Two servings should be enough."

"You intend to leave her here?" asked the giant.

Gento glanced up at him with a puzzled expression.

"The woman is still good for something. Take her with you."

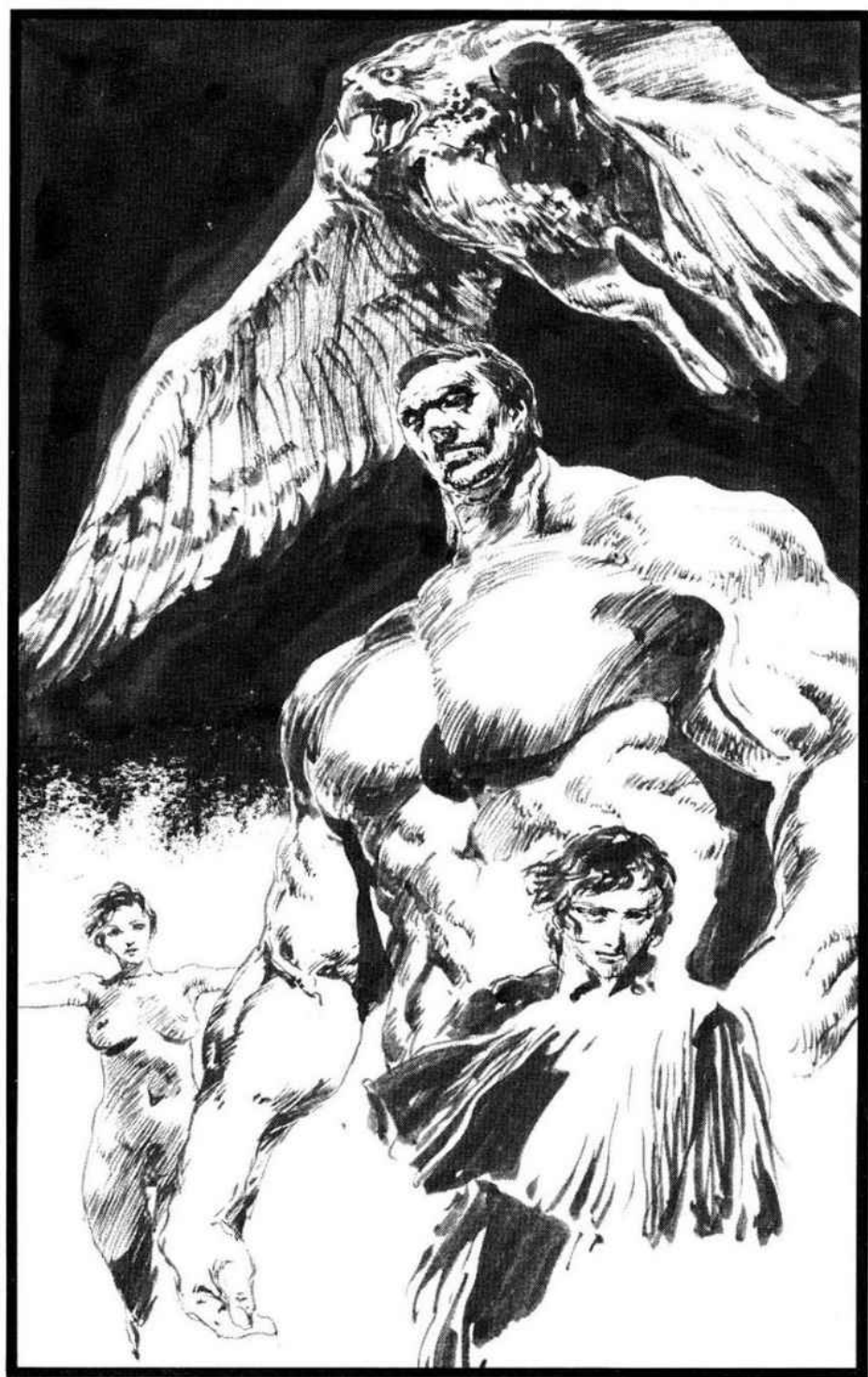
"Hoh. So now you're the one giving the orders?"

The two stared at each other. Ghastly currents flowed between them, ready to draw fresh blood at the slightest touch.

Gento whirled around. "He showed. I'm not the only naive one out tonight."

Out of the darkness at the back of Yasukuni Avenue, reaching towards Kabuki-cho, the man casually strode through haunted moonlight, the black slicker as cool as a dream.

"How nice of you to show up," Gento said, stepping away from Azusa.



Restrained by his accursed wires, the nipple remained in her mouth. Blood stained the underside of her left breast.

His field of vision taking in the entirety of the scene, the

expressionless Setsura said, "Let the girl go."

He was speaking as *him*.

"Out of the question. I can't walk away empty-handed."

"Mayumi-san took flight. From the seventh floor, no less."

"How about that."

"Do you think *I* am lying?"

"No. But if that is indeed the case, I can't very well return *her*. A deal is a deal."

Azusa screamed. The unearthly cry unleashed as her right nipple severed and the drizzle of blood again rained down onto the pavement.

"Move and it'll be the eyes next. Or maybe even if you don't. Just watch and don't raise a fuss."

"Stop it!" Azusa shouted in a near frenzy.

"Siegfried," Gento said sharply. "Get to it."

The giant moved. Toward Azusa. His hands traced a peculiar pattern in the air. Yamada's Dimensional Blade severed the devil wires. Azusa collapsed to the ground.

"Son of a bitch."

"Please. I am only doing what *you* want."

The giant picked up Azusa and placed her on the altar. Setsura observed this unexpected turn of events without comment.

The giant slowly turned around. The wall of muscle, that enormous mass, swept towards him. A body like that imagined by the ancient Greek sculptors, marred by not a single scar.

The destructive power of the Dimensional Blade, that had twice pushed even Gento Roran to the limits, went without saying. This time, facing off against him *and* Gento might actually give Setsura the fight of his life.

But then—a shadow passed across the ground, a dark warp in the moonlight. Forgetting their mutual wager with life and death, they raised their heads and looked into the sky.

From somewhere far away a dog howled.

The moonlight swirled like a whirlpool. From within the outlines of the brilliant white orb arose the shape of a large bird, looming ever larger as it streaked toward the ground.

A pair of radiant red eyes, a hooked beak, the fierce beating of its wings reaching thirty feet across. A *falcon*.

For tonight was the night of the falcon.

Afterword

And so *Maohden* draws ever closer to the climax.

As things stand now, Gento will go from strength to strength, leaving Setsura in the dust, stuck with his own status quo. Well, we'll just have to wait for the final volume to find out how he fares.

Meanwhile, the introduction of Magic Town in Takada no Baba lends an increasingly medieval flavor to the tale.

The model here is Prague in the Czech Republic, the center of black magic, occult science and mysticism in the sixteenth century. In fact, an "Alchemists' Alley" really existed on the grounds of Prague Castle where Rudolf II housed his personal alchemists, astrologers and magicians. There are photographs even, that tell the tale (though probably not taken at the time).

Night and day, smoke of curious color and scents wafting from the old and worn chimneys—human figures moving behind the shaded windows and drawn curtains, carrying out their suspicious experiments—it's the kind of thing that charges up my imagination as well.

As long as this place remains a figment of the past no tourist can visit; as long as there are junior mad scientists holed up in their basements, suffering the scorn of the modern age while keeping alive these age-old experiments with their crazy-ass theories and techniques; as long as there's a tabloid press with at least one eye focused on worldly and commercial success—

Or rather, perhaps *because* of all that, I wanted to bring it back to life, its eerie people and its dark arts. The whole eerie town. A place where I could creep through the spooky shadows, past the stone houses lining the worn cobblestone streets, making my way to outskirts that might not even exist, with only moonlight as my guide—

I suspect I'd have more than a few kindred spirits along for the ride.

I've mentioned this in previous essays, but including the time I spent at college, I lived for eight years in Harajuku. The shops and venues that stood out in my mind included the Roman confectionery shop; the *Leon* tea house; The *Alex* disco; the *Mademoiselle Non-non* boutique; and the *Kiddyland* toy store. It made for quite the relaxing stroll.

My apartment was ten steps (literally) off Meiji Avenue. When I stepped out onto the sidewalk, a bookstore and cafe were right there.

Slip into a side alley, and at the end was a public bath.

All well and good, but my favorites were the Omotesando residential streets heading toward Aoyama Avenue. Especially at night, a casual stroll to the public bath at the top of the hill was a real delight.

Houses like old castles, stone walls wound with ivy; a silhouette sitting at a desk behind French-style bay doors; houses decorated with stained glass windows; an elegant white mansion. Simply imagining the lives being lived there was like venturing into a different world.

My thoughts during those strolls have now suffused *Maohden*.

These days, though, far from going on long walks, I've become a couch potato for whom having to stand up is an inconvenience. But as long as I'm able to preserve those feelings on the printed page, there's hope for me yet.

Maohden may ultimately be less about Setsura vs. Gento than a story of Shinjuku.

I haven't returned to those residential streets I once wandered in my youth, but luckily now I hold the magic of the novel in my hands. After this, please resist the urge to dismiss this as a mere exercise in sentimentality. It's not *that* bad.

And now, a few excerpts from the next volume:

The falcon's bloodshot eyes reflected its red-hot loathing toward all those squirming life forms on the earth below. This was not the product of hunger. This was an otherworldly madness and malice, devoid of those instinctual senses of self-preservation and indifference.

The witch's right hand moved without appearing to move at all. A presence rustled through the air around them, something that should not be there was. The witch's disciple. Mephisto's eyes began to glow with an unnatural light.

The gust of cool wind revealed itself in a slender slash of light. As soon as it twined around a concrete pillar, or a feral dog's head, or the torso of a passing pedestrian, its sheer speed left only the clean cut behind as they crumpled to the ground. Wherever this wind blew, it left in its wake a field of unrestrained, undifferentiating slaughter. Now this glittering wind was attempting to pass through the whole of Shinjuku.

The stars of the show: Setsura Aki, Doctor Mephisto, Gento Roran. The supporting actors: Azusa Sasaki, Hyota, Mayumi, Galeen Nuvenberg. The writer, director and producer: Hideyuki Kikuchi.

Maohden, Volume 3 concludes an entertaining thrill ride that has surprised even its creator. Don't miss it!

Hideyuki Kikuchi (while watching Local Hero)
Late in the night of September 25, 1986

MAOHDEN 2

In the second volume of *Maohden*, Setsura Aki arrives at the Coliseum Death Matches to rescue the seal—the girl known as Mayumi. But Setsura is not the only one who knows Mayumi's secret. In the shadows beneath the Coliseum, his arch-enemy Gento Roran works to pull the strings to outwit Setsura's every move.

Meanwhile, at the other end of Demon City, Azusa Sasaki investigates the suspicious dig behind the new mortuary. What dark thing does Gento Roran seek beneath the earth? And can Azusa ferret it out before Gento's henchman Hyota tracks her down?

As Setsura moves closer to the truth, new alliances and allegiances are forged in the city on the edge of the abyss. Even the Demon Physician, Doctor Mephisto, is brought into the conflict—at Gento's behest. Gento's secret plan to overpower Setsura finds a willing accomplice in Mephisto—or so it seems.

Destroying Gento's seat of power is Setsura's aim. When Setsura discovers its location, a new crisis arises. For the place that holds Gento's accursed coffin is the most haunted building in Demon City Shinjuku—and home to its most terrifying monster.

Don't miss the thrilling second installment in Hideyuki Kikuchi's acclaimed horror trilogy, *Maohden*.

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